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# Native Newspapers: The Emergence of the American Indian Press 1960-Present

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**CLAREMONT McKENNA COLLEGE**

**NATIVE NEWSPAPERS**

**THE EMERGENCE OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN PRESS  
1960-PRESENT**

SUBMITTED TO

PROFESSOR LILY GEISMER

AND

DEAN GREGORY HESS

BY

RUSSELL M. PAGE

FOR

SENIOR THESIS

FALL 2012 AND SPRING 2013

APRIL 29, 2013



*“As media consumers, Indian people are in a particularly harmful position. We consume the thoughts of others about ourselves and the world. The media has, for its own purposes, created a false image of the Native American. Too many of us have patterned ourselves after that image. It is time now that we project our own image and stop being what we never really were.”*<sup>1</sup>

—Gerald Wilkinson, National Indian Youth Council (1974)

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald Wilkinson, “Colonialism Through the Media,” *The Indian Historian* (Summer 1974), 6.



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## Introduction

### Native Journalism

In the South Dakota Newspaper Hall of Fame, on a wall filled with many white faces hangs one bronze visage of an Indian: Tim Giago, an Oglala Lakota man from the Pine Ridge Reservation.<sup>1</sup> In a state that proudly displays Mount Rushmore—the monolithic faces of white men carved into the sacred Black Hills—on its flag and on its license plates, it is a rare thing to see an Indian honored in such a way.<sup>2</sup> The unexpected presence of Giago’s plaque is a symbol of a largely unrecognized and relatively recent emergence of powerful and dynamic American Indian journalists who have represented and advocated for Indian people. Giago’s induction is undoubtedly a testament to the perseverance, courage, and amazing accomplishments of his career and his commitment to Native journalism.<sup>3</sup>

South Dakota has a significant American Indian population with nine reservations and 59,000 enrolled tribal citizens.<sup>4</sup> Before Giago, however, none of South Dakota’s mainstream newspapers had any Indian writers.<sup>5</sup> There were no newspapers owned or operated by Indians leading to stories about Indians riddled with negative stereotypes or were never reported on in the first place.<sup>6</sup>

Giago, frustrated with the void in coverage of Indians by the state’s news media, decided to do something about it. In 1979, Giago, whose only previous writing

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Carrier, “South Dakota Indian Journalist Gave Voice to a People Long Ignored,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 23, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

experience had been editing a shipyard newspaper during his service in the U.S. Navy and publishing a few articles in the national Indian monthly newspaper *Wassaja*, began a column called “Notes from Indian Country,” in the nearby *Rapid City Journal*.<sup>7</sup> After a couple years, Giago became dissatisfied with merely contributing a weekly column and leaving so much of what was happening on his reservation unreported. So he and his wife Doris took out a \$4,000 loan and started up *The Lakota Times*.<sup>8</sup> The newspaper became one of the first successful independently owned Indian newspapers in the United States. For many Pine Ridge residents, *The Lakota Times* was the first paper that told their stories from their perspective.<sup>9</sup> *The Lakota Times* covered all facets of tribal life and became an open forum for various factions of the tribe to debate and sort out their differences.<sup>10</sup>

Giago gradually expanded the newspaper’s coverage and reach to the other reservations and Indian communities in South Dakota. By the early 1990s, the paper covered news from Native communities across all of Indian Country and changed its name to *Indian Country Today*.<sup>11</sup> While working on the newspaper, Giago helped found the Native American Journalists Association (NAJA), and served as the organization’s first president.<sup>12</sup> Under Giago’s leadership, NAJA trained a whole new generation of Native journalists and worked with mainstream media outlets to improve coverage of

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<sup>7</sup> Carrier, “South Dakota Indian Journalist Gave Voice to a People Long Ignored.”

<sup>8</sup> Tim A. Giago, *Notes from Indian Country Volume II 1983-1987*, (Rapid City, SD: Giago Book Publishing, 1999), i.

<sup>9</sup> Carrier, “South Dakota Indian Journalist Gave Voice to a People Long Ignored.”

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Giago, *Notes from Indian Country Volume II*, ii.

Indian Country.<sup>13</sup> Giago's weekly column became nationally syndicated and found its way into mainstream newspapers across the United States like *USA Today* and *The New York Times*.<sup>14</sup> Giago became a recognizable media figure, making appearances on the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, *NBC News*, and *Nightline* to speak about news and issues in Indian Country.<sup>15</sup>

For his groundbreaking efforts, Giago garnered honors such as the H.L. Menken Award, the University of Missouri Distinguished Journalism Award, and a Nieman Fellowship at Harvard.<sup>16</sup> When Giago sold *Indian Country Today* to the Four Directions Media, Inc. in 1998, the paper had subscribers and distributors in all 50 states and in 13 different countries.<sup>17</sup> The newspaper was and still is read by nearly everybody who wants to have a pulse on what is going on in Indian Country. In addition, According to Ernestine Chasing Hawk, the managing editor of *Native Sun News* and one of Giago's protégés, "No other Indian can tout or equal the influence Giago has had in the field of journalism in Indian Country. In fact, he can probably be attributed for coining the term 'Native Journalism' which brought to the forefront controversial issues that other newspapers wouldn't touch."

Tim Giago's storied career, however, was not merely the result of one dogged individual's drive. As is the case for most "pioneers," Giago's breakthroughs marked the fruition of the significant struggles of those who came before him. The post-World War II period saw an unprecedented assertion of American Indians to have their voices and

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<sup>13</sup> Tim Giago, ed., *The American Indian and the Media*, (Minneapolis: National Conference of Christians and Jews, 1991), 1.

<sup>14</sup> Carrier, "South Dakota Indian Journalist Gave Voice to a People Long Ignored."

<sup>15</sup> Ernestine Chasing Hawk, "Tim Giago Retires from the Newsroom," *Native Sun News*, March 8, 2011.

<sup>16</sup> Giago, *Notes from Indian Country Volume II*, i.

<sup>17</sup> Carrier, "South Dakota Indian Journalist Gave Voice to a People Long Ignored."

grievances heard by American society. A generation of Native activists and journalists cried out for just treatment of their people by the government and by mainstream media outlets.

During the 1960s and 1970s, tribes across Indian Country struggled for tribal sovereignty against “termination” policies that aimed to disintegrate the federal government’s trust responsibilities and treaty obligations to tribes and assimilate all Indians into mainstream society. Individual tribes, pan-Indian organizations, and militant Red Power activists rose up in resistance to these policies and fought for self-determination: a preservation of Indian distinctiveness and social and political autonomy. This thesis examines a crucial, but often overlooked, element of the self-determination movement. Hundreds of tribal and national-scope activist newspapers emerged during this era and became the authentic voices of American Indians and the messengers of the movement. This thesis examines the stories of several key newspapers. By looking at the opportunities and challenges their editors faced and the different approaches they took, this thesis will assess how they succeeded and fell short in telling authentic stories from Indian Country, fighting for distinct indigenous culture and rights, and reshaping public discourse and policy on American Indian affairs.

### **Self-Determination Journalism**

During the second half of the twentieth century, the period on which this thesis focuses, the federal government threatened to terminate American Indians’ rights. The policies provoked a backlash resurgence of Indian identity and resistance that fueled self-determination journalism. Post-World War II federal “termination” policies strained the

political autonomy and social cohesiveness of tribal communities. In the 1950s, the federal government began two programs that threatened government-to-government relations with tribal nations: termination and relocation.<sup>18</sup> Cloaked in the language of “civil rights” and “equality,” Congress proposed terminating federal treaty obligations to tribal nations and forcing all Indians to abandon their tribal political and cultural identities to integrate into mainstream American society.<sup>19</sup> The 1953 House Concurrent Resolution 108 declared the United States’ official policy would be to abolish federal ties to tribes and subject tribal citizens to the “same laws, privileges, and responsibilities as other American citizens” as quickly as possible.<sup>20</sup> Over the next two decades, hundreds of tribes were “terminated” and many more felt under constant threat.

At the same time, the Bureau of Indian Affairs launched a relocation program aimed at enticing reservation Indians into moving to large cities like Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Denver, and San Francisco in search of jobs and housing.<sup>21</sup> The program broke up tribes and moved more than 200,000 people away from their families and neighbors and into isolated urban underclasses.<sup>22</sup> As the 1960s opened, Indian nations and distinct Native cultures and identities faced the very real possibility of extinction.

Against this backdrop, people and communities across Indian Country struggled to survive and retain their autonomy and distinctiveness. The resistance that these federal policies provoked in Indian Country fueled an unprecedented organization and

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<sup>18</sup> Roberta Ulrich, *American Indian Nations from Termination to Restoration 1953-2006* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 11.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>20</sup> “House Concurrent Resolution 108 August 1, 1953,” in *Documents of United States Indian Policy*, ed. Francis Paul Prucha (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 233.

<sup>21</sup> Ulrich, 12.

<sup>22</sup> Ulrich, 20.



mobilization of Native activism.<sup>23</sup> While the issues and motivations of activists in this era were diverse, they were unified by the goal of self-determination. Self-determination broadly meant allowing Indian communities to have power over their government, resources, and lives.<sup>24</sup> It also meant holding the federal government accountable for upholding its treaty obligations to provide resources to tribes and Indians.<sup>25</sup>

The printed press provided a crucial, but underappreciated avenue through which American Indian activists both advanced the cause of self-determination and tried to turn the tide against termination policies. Native journalists sought to counter existing media stereotypes that dated back to the earliest colonial encounters with Indians. Mainstream American media accounts of Indian Country nearly always misjudged or caricatured Indians as a vanishing race of noble savages, violent warriors, or as desperately dependent wards of the state.<sup>26</sup> The mainstream media treated Indian people as a “problem” and offered many solutions that rarely took into account any perspectives from Indians themselves.<sup>27</sup> These depictions had previously led many Indians to shun the mainstream culture and media that ignored and failed to incorporate them.

When faced with termination and possible extinction of distinct indigenous cultures, however, tribes and Native activists realized they would need to publicly speak up to save their rights. And if the mainstream media would not listen to them or include their voices, they would create their own media and force them to listen. Rupert Costo, the editor of *Wassaja*, a national Indian newspaper that operated during the 1970s, said,

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<sup>23</sup> Alvin M. Josephy, Jr., *Red Power: The American Indians' Fight for Freedom*, (New York: American Heritage Press, 1970), 16.

<sup>24</sup> Josephy, 16.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>26</sup> Murray L. Wax and Robert W. Buchanan, ed., *Solving “The Indian Problem”: The White Man’s Burdensome Business*, (New York: New York Times Books, 1972), 5.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

“Mass media have the ear of the general public, and even most of the Indian people. They are propagandizing their own brand of policy and approach to Indian issues. Should the Indians ignore them? If we do, we risk everything.”<sup>28</sup> In order to change the public’s perception of Indians and promote more enlightened federal policies, tribes and Indians needed to disseminate alternative, authentic perspectives through their own media.

This was not an entirely novel idea. In the 1820s, when the Cherokee Nation fought for its survival in its homeland, tribal leaders purchased a printing press to advocate for their cause in the *Cherokee Phoenix*.<sup>29</sup> Other tribes and Indian communities tried similar approaches to publish their perspectives in print as the United States expanded westward and forced Indian nations into successive policies of annihilation, assimilation, and integration.<sup>30</sup> A few Indian activists in the early twentieth century, like Carlos Montezuma, fought for Indian rights by publishing subversive newspapers and newsletters.<sup>31</sup> These early Indian newspapers are the subjects of Chapter One. Other Indian voices came through in Bureau of Indian Affairs agency publications and school newspapers run by missionaries on reservations.<sup>32</sup> But up until the 1960s, outside of a few isolated cases, an authentic American Indian-owned and operated media was almost completely nonexistent.

Native newspapers that emerged in the termination era signaled and represented the different missions and visions of self-determination activism. The first newspapers to

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<sup>28</sup> Rupert Costo, “Mass Media Comment,” *Wassaja*, January 1976, 2.

<sup>29</sup> Meta G. Carstarphen, “To Sway Public Opinion: Early Persuasive Appeals in the *Cherokee Phoenix* and *Cherokee Advocate*,” in *American Indians and the Mass Media*, ed. Meta G. Carstarphen and John P. Sanchez (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012), 63.

<sup>30</sup> James E. Murphy and Sharon M. Murphy, *Let My People Know: American Indian Journalism, 1828-1978*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981), 39.

<sup>31</sup> Peter Iverson, *Carlos Montezuma and the Changing World of American Indians* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), 113.

<sup>32</sup> Murphy and Murphy, 56.

appear came from tribal governments who felt most threatened by the specter of termination.<sup>33</sup> Starting in the late 1950s and early 1960s, hundreds of tribes began to publish newspapers to promote cohesiveness within their communities and to project images of strength, competence, and progress to state and federal government officials.<sup>34</sup>

Tribal papers attempted to address two audiences: Indians living within their tribal communities and outsiders in the mainstream public and American political system. In theory, these newspapers were supposed to operate much like community newspapers in cities or counties in the United States, reporting on life in their communities, local governments, and acting as boosters for local issues and concerns.<sup>35</sup> But tribal newspapers differed from those papers in a very important way: they were owned, funded, and operated by tribal governments whose leaders wanted to maintain their positions of power.<sup>36</sup> Most tribal papers thus became mouthpieces for tribal governments, promoting the interests of tribal bureaucrats over those of all people in tribes.<sup>37</sup> The story of the staff of one these tribal newspapers—the *Navajo Times*—asserting itself against a particularly dictatorial tribal chairman in an effort to promote press freedom, government accountability, and the public interest of the tribe's people is the subject of Chapter Two.

National-scope Indian newspapers, independent from tribal governments, came to the forefront in the late 1960s and early 1970s as Red Power and self-determination activists attempted to create media platforms to promote their agendas. In reaction to termination, national-scope pan-Indian organizations and activist networks formed to

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<sup>33</sup> Murphy and Murphy, 90.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 91.

<sup>35</sup> John C. Sim, *The Grass Roots Press: America's Community Newspapers*, (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1969), xii.

<sup>36</sup> Murphy and Murphy, 92.

<sup>37</sup> Murphy and Murphy, 91.

protect and promote the interests of Indian communities.<sup>38</sup> The self-determination movement had both an inside game of negotiation and compromise with the White House and Congress through more pragmatic tribal government an establishment-supported organizations and an outside game of attention-seeking confrontational agitation and militant protest from idealistic “Red Power” activists. Two newspapers rose to national prominence and represented and spoke for the two very different approaches to self-determination activism.<sup>39</sup>

*Akwesasne Notes*, the subject of Chapter Three, grew out of a small grassroots newsletter on an upstate New York reservation into the voice of the radical Red Power movement.<sup>40</sup> *Notes* contributors embedded themselves in confrontational events like the seizure of the Bureau of Indian Affairs building in Washington, DC and the violent American Indian Movement (AIM) occupation of Wounded Knee, SD. From inside the protest movement, *Notes* writers reported stories only they could access.<sup>41</sup> *Notes*’ uncompromising nature riled up and connected a strong base of Indians who were angry at the state of Indian affairs and united a movement into a powerful force.<sup>42</sup> The newspaper’s lack of respect for political institutions and its overly idealistic visions, nevertheless, prevented the paper from achieving or acknowledging modest successes in policy changes.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Thomas W. Cowger, *The National Congress of American Indians: The Founding Years*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 3.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 80.

<sup>40</sup> Doug George-Kanentiio, “*Akwesasne Notes*: How the Mohawk Nation Created a Newspaper and Shaped Contemporary Native America,” in *Voices from the Underground: Insider Histories of the Vietnam Era Underground Press, Part 1*, ed. Ken Wachsberger (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011), 137.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 127.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 137.

<sup>43</sup> Murphy and Murphy, 87.

*Wassaja*, the focus of Chapter Four, on the other hand, was a national newspaper created by prominent Indian activists from San Francisco who knew establishment media and politics well.<sup>44</sup> Rupert and Jeanette Costo, the visionary editors of *Wassaja*, had both journalism experience and valuable connections with powerful tribal and federal political figures.<sup>45</sup> The Costos used their newspaper to successfully lobby officials in setting the federal Indian policy agenda.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, *Wassaja*'s detachment from most reservation communities because of its headquarters in urban San Francisco and heavy focus on Washington made it removed from much of the desperate anger present across Indian Country.<sup>47</sup>

Chapters Three and Four look at these two national activist Indian papers to assess their respective strengths and shortcomings. In different ways, both newspapers were necessary for connecting a nationwide network of Indian readers and activists, bringing awareness to the general public about Indian issues, and pressuring those in power to create positive policy changes.

The final chapter returns to Tim Giago and explores the lessons he learned from the successes and failures of each of the earlier newspapers. Giago tried to incorporate all these lessons into the development and structure of *The Lakota Times* and later *Indian Country Today*.<sup>48</sup> His paper stood independent from the Pine Ridge Reservation government from the outset, and Giago did his best to represent people from all factions

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<sup>44</sup> Murphy and Murphy, 83.

<sup>45</sup> "Rupert Costo," in *Encyclopedia of American Indian History*, Bruce E. Johansen and Barry M. Pritzner ed., (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2007), 700.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Murphy and Murphy, 87.

<sup>48</sup> Giago, *Notes from Indian Country Volume II 1983-1987*, ii.

of his tribe in the pages of his newspaper.<sup>49</sup> He tried to balance in-depth coverage on tribe-specific issues and stories from across Indian Country.<sup>50</sup> Under Giago, the newspaper attempted to balance celebrating distinct indigenous culture and traditions with an effort to reach out to mainstream American society to establish mutual understanding and to state and federal officials to advance the interests of both his tribe and Indian Country as a whole.<sup>51</sup>

### **The Medium Was the Message**

Media theorist Marshall McLuhan famously coined the phrase, “The medium is the message.”<sup>52</sup> McLuhan wrote that the medium of a message itself shaped and controlled “the scale and form of human association and action.”<sup>53</sup> What McLuhan meant was that the method by which knowledge or information is delivered to an audience dictates the resonance of the message.<sup>54</sup> Printed words in a book or in a newspaper deliver information differently than movies, television, or oral presentations.

Newspapers were particularly well suited to become the medium through which tribes and Indian communities found their voice. Wide circulation was possible through the mail. Audiences required no technology to access newspapers. Readers could read through them at their own pace and find a depth of ideas and information that could only be fitted into printed articles. Television appearances, radio segments and in-person experiences at political demonstrations may have provoked immediate visceral reactions

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<sup>49</sup> Giago, *Notes from Indian Country Volume II*, i.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, ii.

<sup>51</sup> Carrier, “South Dakota Indian Journalist Gave Voice to a People Long Ignored.”

<sup>52</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, (New York: Mentor, 1964), 9.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 18.

in audiences, but these mediums were limited by physical and time constraints. Newspapers also communicated aesthetically through photographs, political cartoons, poetry, and literature, capturing authentic pictures and images of “Indianness.” Newspapers’ major strength, however, was their ability to leave behind permanent physical records of well-crafted messages that could have an instant impact but could also provide a wealth of in-depth information to a large and diverse network of readers.

### **Challenges in Covering Indian Country**

In *Imagined Communities*, nationalism scholar Benedict Anderson theorizes that nations in Europe formed when print-capitalism allowed for groups of people to identify together through print communications.<sup>55</sup> Whomever read the same publications felt and thus became incorporated into the various nations.<sup>56</sup> By the same token, the people who managed printed publications dictated their content and thus controlled who was included in communities, the ways these communities perceived themselves, and the representations of the communities projected to the outside world.<sup>57</sup>

The same idea translates into the modern media and those they choose to represent. Those who receive coverage in a newspaper know that they are a part of a community, whether it is through seeing their daughter’s basketball score in a small town paper or seeing like-minded people covered in a story in a national-scope newspaper. Newspapers from the *Claremont Courier* to the *Los Angeles Times* to *USA Today* represent and speak for their communities. Their editors and writers investigate local

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<sup>55</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, (London: Verso, 1983), 37.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

institutions, promote the public interest, and act as boosters for their communities to outside readers.

Indian Country is a vast, diverse, and complex community. It makes sense that covering the news and attempting to represent and reconcile the varied peoples and distinct interests of all of Indian Country would be a near impossible task. Each of the newspapers covered in this thesis encountered challenges when trying to represent and speak for their respective Indian communities. These challenges included: a lack of open and free press on many reservations; choosing between promoting honest, critical discourse within the local community or bolstering the community's image for influential outside observers; choosing between confrontation or compromise when advocating for Indian rights; representing all people, factions, and interests within communities; and finding a way to authentically represent "Indianness" by striking a balance between distinctive indigeneity and "normal American" modernity.

Freedom of the press is necessary for holding powerful institutions accountable, and for promoting healthy public discourse between competing ideas and groups in a democratic society. For a variety of reasons, there has been significant difficulty in creating an open and free press in Indian Country communities. One major reason for this is simply geographical. Most reservations are inaccessible and remote, making their stories prohibitively difficult for newspapers to cover. "Because of logistics, language barriers, and a deep misunderstanding and mistrust of tribal governments," Tim Giago said in 2005, "many newspapers have simply ignored the people of the Indian reservations."<sup>58</sup> Giago's line of reasoning does not, however, account for why Indian-

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<sup>58</sup> Tim Giago, "Freedom of the Press in Indian Country," *Nieman Reports*, Fall 2005.



owned newspapers struggled to establish a free press within their own communities. The primary reason for their struggles was funding. Because there was little other way to pay the operating costs of printing a newspaper, nearly all tribal newspapers were subsidized by tribal government budgets. Government funding created an obvious conflict of interest, preventing editorial independence and oversight over the tribal government officials. The other reason was contentious infighting that pervaded many Indian communities. A true free press should not fear exposing or speaking out against any perceived wrongdoing. But in Indian Country, where power struggles between factions have turned violent, printing something that somebody may disagree with can be a risky move. Tribal government shutdowns and violent attacks have destroyed many attempts at free printed discourse in Indian Country. Only those newspapers that managed to find a way to persevere through high stakes and assert their editorial independence were able to effectively promote the ideals of freedom of the press.

Once taking control over editorial decisions, Native newspapers faced was choosing between honestly reporting both the good and bad news in their communities or acting as tribal or Indian Country boosters to demonstrate to outside observers that Indian and tribal communities were capable of managing their own affairs. During the termination era—when tribes lived under the threat losing their federal treaty rights and individual Indians constantly felt pressure to abandon their social and political autonomy—many Indian newspapers naturally reported only good news designed to show federal policymakers that Indian Country deserved to stay alive. Yet if Indian newspapers were to actually live up to the ideals of self-determination, they needed to act to improve their communities by reporting local news honestly, exposing scandals, and

acting as a forum to consider ways tribes could solve their own problems. These two missions for newspapers obviously came into conflict with each other and created difficult decisions for Native editors and journalists.

Those newspapers that chose to focus on influencing outside public discourse on Indian affairs had to figure out the best method of advocacy. *Akwesasne Notes* took a radical and confrontational approach, rallying an angry base of grassroots militants and helping them create a groundswell of activism that forced political leaders to take action on Indian affairs. Other newspapers took a more accommodating, “working within the system” approach to advocacy. *Wassaja* and the original *Navajo Times* reached out to Washington leaders and tried to create positive relationships that led to incremental and pragmatic progress on Indian policy. Both strategies had inherent strengths and weaknesses. For the self-determination movement to succeed, both were necessary.

Another important challenge newspapers faced was deciding whom to cover in their pages, and thus who to incorporate into their “imagined communities.” Most of the newspapers claimed to be writing for “all Indian people,” but whom they actually chose to cover varied. The variety of people that a newspaper covered demonstrated how expansive of a view the paper’s editors held of who was in their community.

The scope of a newspaper’s geographical reach dictated whom it covered. Indian Country is diverse and large. There are hundreds of tribes on reservations all over the United States, many more federally unrecognized tribes, and diaspora urban Indian populations in a lot of major cities.<sup>59</sup> Even the best-staffed newspaper with ample resources would struggle to adequately cover all of Indian Country or even all elements

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<sup>59</sup> Tim Giago, “Overview of the American Indian,” *Nieman Reports*, Summer 1991.

of one tribe. Some of the papers focused solely on one tribe and had more ability to understand distinct local contexts. Others tried to cover all of Indian Country, stretching their resources rather thin and barely being able to skim the surface of life and news from various regions.

Most tribal newspapers naturally only covered members of their tribe. Being an enrolled member of a tribe depends on factors like amount of Indian heritage and residence on a reservation. Some tribal newspapers also covered other people and other tribes in their local area. National-scope newspapers had a more difficult task in deciding who belonged in their “imagined community” of Indian Country. Definitions of who counts as a “real Indian” vary greatly across Indian Country. Some experts contend that only enrolled tribal members are actually Indians. But only including tribal citizens in Indian Country excludes members of federally unrecognized tribes, many urban Indians living in diaspora communities, and many American people who claim Indian heritage.

Many Indian communities—from the tribal level to Indian Country as a whole—contain divisive factions. Certain newspapers reflected these tensions by representing and covering only one side of a power struggle; either that of incumbents within a tribal government or pan-Indian establishment organization or that of an oppositional political faction. Only those newspapers that were allowed true freedom of the press were able to maintain a sense of removed objectivity and cover all groups in a community with respect and fairness, affording multiple perspectives relatively equal space and treatment.

Beyond including everyone in their communities, newspapers also had to grapple with how to create authentic representations of “Indianness.” Since initial contact with European colonizers, Indian communities have struggled to maintain distinct cultural

identities while being forced to assimilate with the dominant colonial society. In the modern day, Indians have struggled to reconcile distinct indigenous and tribal identities that are many times connected with the past with contemporary changes that are usually associated with the outside colonial world. Many tribal communities have conflicts between “full-bloods,” who uphold what they see as traditional indigenous ways of life, and “half-bloods,” who focus on more mainstream pursuits, may compromise more with the federal government, and may not look like typical imagined images of “postcard Indians.”

Land bases, treaties, and recent memories of political autonomy have made American Indians distinct from other minority groups like African, Latino, and Asian Americans. Unlike those groups whose social and political struggles have often aimed to promote integration into the American mainstream, multicultural “melting pot,” Indians have typically taken a different approach to social and political inclusion in the United States. Historian Philip J. Deloria writes: “One bird’s-view history of the twentieth century might tell of the ways Indian people reworked a sense of distinctiveness and difference, fighting off the colonizing ways the United States sought to include them, and demanding a very particular kind of inclusion, one based on unique political status.”<sup>60</sup>

Representing this dichotomy of a desire for indigenous distinctiveness and separation and a hope for inclusion in modern American life presented Native newspapers a complex challenge. Some of the newspapers tried to present only traditional and culturally distinctive aspects of Indian communities such as native ceremonies and people living according to “traditional” values. Others tried to portray

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<sup>60</sup> Philip J. Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places*, (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 237.

Indians as “normal” modern people, doing such activities as playing basketball or participating in American elections. Most of the newspapers did both, however, dispelling simple stereotypes of American Indians as either noble savages or a vanishing, assimilating race.

### **Largely Forgotten Stories**

The stories of Native newspapers have been given far too little scholarly attention. In 1986, archivist Daniel E. Littlefield, Jr. wrote in a Native American studies academic journal:

It is time to recognize the native press for what it represents in American Indian studies: resource materials generated for the most part by native peoples themselves. Since the native press in general represents the voice of the Indian community, the continued credibility of those involved in American Indian studies will be measured in some degree by the extent to which they take that voice into account.<sup>61</sup>

Littlefield’s comments underscored the importance of Native newspapers as authentic voices of American Indian people, but they also reveal how shockingly little had been written on the remarkable and heroic stories of modern Native journalists. Littlefield implored academics in the budding field of American Indian studies to examine the stories of Native newspapers and consider the voices of Indian journalists.

In the 1980s, after all of the newspapers covered in this thesis had been in print, Littlefield, a research librarian at the University of Arkansas, Little Rock compiled many Native publications into the American Native Press Archives. In addition to Littlefield’s archive, various other libraries and research centers across the country collected Native

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<sup>61</sup> Daniel Littlefield Jr., “The American Native Press and American Indian Studies,” *Wicazo Sa Review* (Autumn 1986), 56.

newspapers in hard copy and in microfilm. The Costos of *Wassaja* even left behind most of their possessions, letters, and clippings from Native publications from the termination and self-determination eras in the Rupert Costo Archive of the American Indian at the University of California, Riverside.

Although primary materials exist in abundance, and many of the editors and writers from these newspapers are mostly still alive and eager to tell their stories, over the last few decades, the history of the emergent American Indian press has still so far gone largely untold. The stories of the *Cherokee Phoenix* and Carlos Montezuma's early twentieth century activist newsletter *Wassaja* have received some scholarly attention in books and scholarly articles.<sup>62</sup> But outside of a few encyclopedic books that chronicled lists of newspapers with short blurbs and basic information or brief mentions of the newspapers in books or reports covering other aspects of post-World War II American Indian politics and activism, nothing but issues the Native newspapers themselves and a few firsthand accounts from Native journalists and editors have been published.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Meta G. Carstarphen, "To Sway Public Opinion: Early Persuasive Appeals in the *Cherokee Phoenix* and *Cherokee Advocate*," and Peter Iverson, *Carlos Montezuma and the Changing World of American Indians*.

<sup>63</sup> There are a few collections of essays on American Indians and the media which touch on important stories of Native journalism such as *Shoot the Indian: Media, Misperception and Native Truth* ed. José Barreiro, Kara Briggs, and Ronald D. Smith (Buffalo, NY: American Indian Policy & Media Initiative, 2007); *American Indians and Mass Media* ed. Meta G. Carstarphen and John P. Sanchez (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012); *The American Indian and the Media* ed. Tim Giago (Minneapolis: National Conference of Christians and Jews, 1991). These books and essays offer important analyses of the mainstream media's portrayal of Indians and some basic information on Native media.

Also of critical importance to this thesis were secondary books that listed Native newspapers and gave brief accounts of each. The best example of this is the three-volume encyclopedia by Daniel E. Littlefield, Jr. and James W. Parins, *American Indian and Alaska Native Newspapers and Periodicals*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984-1986). This book gave me a good idea of which newspapers, out of the hundreds that were published during the post-WWII era, to look at more closely.

A more comprehensive study was James E. Murphy and Sharon M. Murphy's first effort to write a full overview of the history and state of Native journalism, *Let My People Know: American Indian Journalism, 1828-1978*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981). I used the Murphy book extensively for both its thorough accounts of early newspapers like the *Cherokee Phoenix* and Carlos Montezuma's *Wassaja* and for its descriptions and analysis of Native newspapers that were still being published when the book was written—the *Navajo Times*, *Akwesasne Notes*, and the Costos' *Wassaja*.<sup>63</sup> Because the Murphys' book

The dearth of secondary literature on Native newspapers, posed both a challenge and opportunity in the formulation and research of this thesis as it created key holes but allowed a strong focus on the newspapers themselves. I scrolled through rolls and rolls of microfilm to look at years of issues for each newspaper. When looking at issues, I focused on what issues editorials focused on, who and what the papers covered, and the layout, images, and cartoons. I looked at the content or articles and tried to determine why certain issues and people were covered or were absent. I also made sure to analyze letters to the editor sections and any information about readership to determine how far each newspaper was spreading its message. Much of my conclusions about the tone, approach, and political stances of the newspapers came from my own personal interpretation after spending hours carefully reading through many issues.

But reading through issues and jumping to my own conclusions obviously not go far enough in gleaning a full picture of how these newspapers operated and what the intentions of their editors and writers were. To fill in that information, I found firsthand accounts from the staff of the respective newspapers. In some cases, editors and writers left behind detailed accounts of their newspapers' histories. Doug George-Kanentiio of *Akwesasne Notes*, for instance, wrote a full chapter on the history of *Notes*, complete with

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was written during the historical period when most of the newspapers were being circulated, the book works equally well as a primary source, giving a glimpse into how the newspapers were perceived when they were published.

In addition to these few secondary books that focused exclusively on Native journalism and the emergence of an American Indian media, I also found helpful information in books that primarily focused on other elements of twentieth century American Indian politics and history. Some books about specific tribes or urban Indian communities provided helpful contextual information on the times and places where the various newspapers originated. For example, political scientist David E. Wilkins' *The Navajo Political Experience*, (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), a compendium of Navajo governmental history, had a good section on the *Navajo Times*' struggles to achieve freedom of the press. Laurence M. Hauptman's *The Iroquois Struggle for Survival: World War II to Red Power* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986) detailed many forms of activism that came out of the Six Nations, including a small section on *Akwesasne Notes*.

observations on the operation of the newspaper and the motivation of its contributors.<sup>64</sup>

The Costos left behind much of their personal stories in the Rupert Costo Archive of the American Indian at U.C. Riverside.<sup>65</sup> They also left behind transcribed oral history accounts that provided useful information on their experience with *Wassaja* and their connections to political leaders and national Indian advocacy organizations.<sup>66</sup> Tim Giago also wrote up accounts of his time editing *The Lakota Times* and *Indian Country Today* in articles for the Nieman Foundation at Harvard and in books compiling his “Notes from Indian Country” columns.<sup>67</sup> In certain cases where I did not have enough information, I reached out to former journalists to conduct oral history interviews. Mark Trahant of the *Navajo Times*, Doug George-Kanentiio of *Akwesasne Notes*, and Tim Giago of *The Lakota Times* and *Indian Country Today* all agreed to speak with me and provided me with essential information for understanding the history of their publications.<sup>68</sup>

The academic disciplines of history, American Indian studies, and journalism have all largely overlooked the substantial contributions made by Native journalists. This thesis is one attempt to make up for the lack of secondary analysis of these newspapers

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<sup>64</sup> Doug George-Kanentiio, “*Akwesasne Notes*: How the Mohawk Nation Created a Newspaper and Shaped Contemporary Native America,” in *Voices from the Underground: Insider Histories of the Vietnam Era Underground Press, Part I*, ed. Ken Wachsberger (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011), 137.

<sup>65</sup> Cheryl A. Metoyer-Duran, “Guide to the Rupert Costo Archive of the American Indian,” (Riverside: University of California Riverside, 2002).

<sup>66</sup> Jan Erickson, “Transcription of an Oral History Interview with Jeannette Costo,” U.C. Riverside, July 27, 1998, <http://www.ucrhistory.ucr.edu/pdf/costo.pdf>.

<sup>67</sup> Tim Giago, “Freedom of the Press in Indian Country,” *Nieman Reports*, Fall 2005; Tim Giago, *Notes from Indian Country Volume I* (Pierre, SD: State Publishing Company, 1984); Tim Giago, *Notes from Indian Country Volume II*, (Rapid City, SD: Giago Book Publishing, 1999).

<sup>68</sup> Trahant, Giago, and George-Kanentiio also pointed me toward useful written resources and books about their newspapers and Native journalism in general. Oral histories may have certain flaws in the sense that people’s memories may not always present the most factually accurate stories. People tend to change their personal narratives and recollections over time. Nevertheless, when so little has been written about a subject, oral history accounts can do much to fill in large gaps of information.



and finally start telling the important stories of these newspapers and their heroic journalists. Hopefully, this will be the first of many more in-depth looks at the significant work produced by twentieth century Native newspapers. These publications deserve more recognition than they have been given for providing American Indians authentic representation in the media, for forcing American policymakers to rethink Indian affairs, and for making free and open discourse possible in Indian Country.

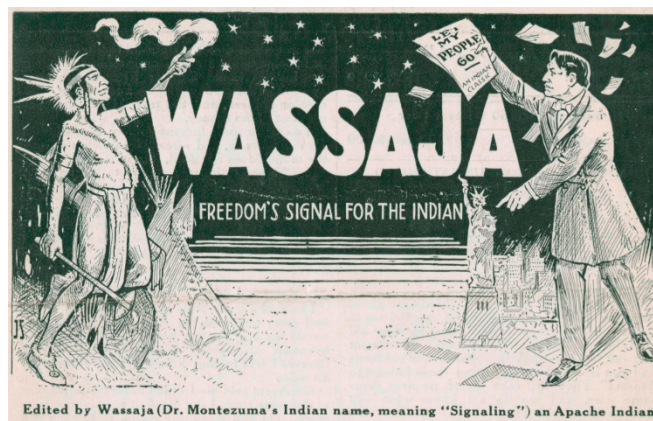
## Chapter One

### Precedents from Early Indian Newspapers



*“Such a paper, comprising a summary of religious and political events, etc. on the one hand; and on the other, exhibiting the feelings, disposition, improvements, and prospects of the Indians; their traditions, their true character, as it once was and as it now is; the ways and means most likely to throw the mantle of civilization over all tribes, and such other matter as will tend to diffuse proper and correct impressions in regard to their condition—such a paper could not fail to create much interest in the American community, favourable to the aborigines, and to have a powerful influence on the advancement of the Indians themselves...I do not say that Indians will produce learned and elaborate dissertations in explanation and vindication of their own character; but they may exhibit specimens of their intellectual efforts, of their eloquence, of their moral, civil and physical advancement, which will do quite as much to remove prejudice and to give profitable information.”<sup>1</sup>*

—Elias Boudinot, Editor of the *Cherokee Phoenix* (1826)



*“WASSAJA the only paper that stands alone, that dares to fight, that is fearless to express the truth of the mistreatment of the Indian as a man.”<sup>2</sup>*

—Dr. Carlos Montezuma, Editor of *Wassaja* (1918)

<sup>1</sup> Elias Boudinot, “Boudinot’s Address to the Whites,” in *Let My People Know*, ed. James E. Murphy and Sharon M. Murphy (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981), 173-174.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Iverson, *Carlos Montezuma and the Changing World of American Indians* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), 113.

The creation of an American Indian-operated media dates back to some the earliest indigenous struggles against the United States government. The Indian people ever since have used various forms of Indian media as a means of empowerment of and as a mode of protest and advocacy against assimilationist and exterminationist federal Indian policies. This chapter will focus on two major newspaper efforts that predated the post-1960 renaissance of the Native press: the *Cherokee Phoenix*—the national newspaper of the Cherokee Nation published in the late 1820s and early 1830s—and *Wassaja*—a political newsletter published by prominent Indian rights activist Carlos Montezuma in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. These two different types of publications reveal a great deal about the complicated and sometimes conflicting missions of Indian journalism and the unique challenges of reporting and editorializing in Indian Country.

The original editor of the *Cherokee Phoenix*, Elias Boudinot, faced a dilemma between covering tribal politics and events accurately—flaws and all—to inform tribal citizens or offering a glowing picture of their community to the outside world of influential Washington and Georgia policy makers.<sup>3</sup> He also lacked the freedom of the press afforded to mainstream American newspapers due to pressure from the tribal government that owned the paper and hostilities from Anglo neighbors.<sup>4</sup> The high stakes of publishing against the backdrop of intratribal factionalism and anti-Indian hatred from local whites and government officials would become a mainstay in Native journalism for nearly every future Indian publication.

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<sup>3</sup> Meta G. Carstarphen, “To Sway Public Opinion: Early Persuasive Appeals in the *Cherokee Phoenix* and *Cherokee Advocate*,” in *American Indians and the Mass Media*, ed. Meta G. Carstarphen and John P. Sanchez (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012), 63.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 59.

Nearly 100 years later, Montezuma faced different, but equally pertinent, challenges in covering Indian issues. Born to Yavapai Apache parents in the Arizona Territory but raised by an adoptive white father, Montezuma struggled to find an identity that properly blended traditional, indigenous values with modernity.<sup>5</sup> He believed strongly that Indians should be allowed to modernize and meet their full potential, but he also wanted them to retain their unique cultural identities.<sup>6</sup> After bucking with more mainstream Indian rights organizations due to his radical views on abolishing the Bureau of Indian Affairs and allowing Indians to both modernize and retain their distinctive cultural and political identities, Montezuma began publishing *Wassaja*, a monthly newsletter that carried fierce and uncompromising commentary on the state of Indian affairs.<sup>7</sup> *Wassaja*'s extreme editorials galvanized supporters, but they also deterred and alienated moderate lobbyists and policy makers.<sup>8</sup> Because *Wassaja* was a national publication in scope, Montezuma also had to choose between speaking for all of diverse Indian Country or for local causes in his native Southern Arizona.<sup>9</sup>

The issues of a compromising versus confrontational tone and local versus national scope that Boudinot and Montezuma dealt with would become key problems for later Native publications to sort out. The precedents set by both of these early attempts at Indian journalism inspired the renaissance of Native newspapers in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and presaged many of the challenges and issues that would still be ever present in covering the news in Indian Country.

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<sup>5</sup> Iverson, 63.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 74.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 106.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 179.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 123.

### *Cherokee Phoenix*

Facing forced relocation, extermination, and assimilation, the Cherokee Nation, one of the Southeastern “Civilized Tribes,” turned to the printing press in the 1820s as a means of protest and advocacy. Tribal leaders and sympathetic missionaries thought that a national newspaper could be used to demonstrate to officials how highly civilized the Cherokee were and to defend their sovereignty.

For decades, greedy neighboring whites in Georgia coveting the Cherokee Nation’s rich lands had aggressively lobbied for and legislated means of crippling Cherokee sovereignty and forcing removal of supposedly “savage Indians.”<sup>10</sup> Many of these whites had terrible and incorrect impressions of Indians based upon faulty accounts in mainstream American newspapers. According to journalism historian Meta G. Carstarphen, American newspapers—dating all the way back to the first colonial paper, *Publick Occurrences, Both Forreign and Domestick*—uniformly portrayed American Indians only through the lens of “provocative depictions...as savage and uncivilized.”<sup>11</sup> Carstarphen argues that colonial and early American newspapers created a dominant narrative that ignored indigenous voices and instead generated “a long colonial publishing history that eviscerated the Indian symbolically and thematically.”<sup>12</sup>

For their part, the Cherokee Nation, probably more than any other tribe, adapted to changing times and worked to accommodate and defy the discriminatory expectations of their white neighbors. They welcomed church missionaries who taught them about

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<sup>10</sup> Mark N. Trahan, *Pictures of Our Nobler Selves* (Nashville: The Freedom Forum First Amendment Center, 1995), 6.

<sup>11</sup> Carstarphen, 62.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

Christianity and means of “civilization.”<sup>13</sup> The Cherokees adopted many practices from neighboring whites. An 1825 census authorized by the Cherokee National Council showed that Cherokees had many advanced technologies such as ferryboats, blacksmith shops, cotton machines, and wagons.<sup>14</sup> The Cherokees proved they were capable of living advanced, modern lives of worth in the white American framework even though they maintained that they were entitled to a separate political and cultural life from the United States. The Cherokee, therefore, had done exactly what anti-Indian bigots said they could not; they achieved a non-savage yet still authentically Indian nation.

Nevertheless, efforts to remove the Cherokees continued. In 1824, President James Monroe, Secretary of War John C. Calhoun, and Secretary of State John Quincy Adams summoned a Cherokee delegation to Washington to negotiate an extinguishment of aboriginal title in Georgia.<sup>15</sup> The delegation, led by tribal leader Major Ridge, refused to negotiate claiming: “Even if the United States paid all of the money in its treasury or exchanged twice as much land...such compensation would fall short of equity.”<sup>16</sup> The Cherokee representatives also told the federal officials that the Cherokee Nation “could not recognize the sovereignty of a state within the limits of its territory.”<sup>17</sup> But their firm opposition was ignored. Georgia state legislators, who viewed the 1824 meeting as a federal promise of Indian removal, enacted laws throughout the 1820s designed to erode Cherokee sovereignty and destroy the will of Cherokee people to resist removal.<sup>18</sup> The

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<sup>13</sup> James E. Murphy and Sharon M. Murphy, *Let My People Know: American Indian Journalism, 1828-1978* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981), 23.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Trahant, 6.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

Cherokees desperately needed a way to unite in resistance and have their voices heard in the larger American public discourse to defend against further encroachment.

The invention of a Cherokee alphabet and written language became the powerful agent of change that spurred this voice. Beginning in 1809, Sequoyah, a Cherokee man who had served in the United States Army during the War of 1812 against the Creek Indians, began developing a system of writing for the previously oral Cherokee language.<sup>19</sup> According to historians James E. Murphy and Sharon M. Murphy, Sequoyah had “realized that white society possessed in written language a power his people lacked.”<sup>20</sup> He created a system of symbols for every syllable in the spoken Cherokee language and succeeded in creating a code for every word and phrase.<sup>21</sup> Throughout the 1810s and 1820s, Sequoyah tried to get his language to catch on.<sup>22</sup> By the mid-1820s, the National Council had adopted the written language most people in the Cherokee Nation were literate and able to read it.<sup>23</sup> At first, missionaries primarily used the written language for translations of religious and educational texts to “uplift” the Cherokees.<sup>24</sup> Rather quickly, however, the National Council and supporters of the tribe realized the potential of print media to unite its people and influence public perception of the Cherokee Nation.

The Council decided that the best way for the Cherokee Nation to advocate for itself in its trying circumstances would be through publishing a print newspaper.

According to Murphy and Murphy, the Cherokees decided it would be best to “use the

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<sup>19</sup> Murphy and Murphy, 21.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 23.

white man's weapons...to unify opinion in the nation and gain outside support for the Indians' rights to the their homelands."<sup>25</sup> In 1827, the Council, with the help of the sympathetic missionary Samuel Worcester, purchased a printing press that had both English and Cherokee typeface.<sup>26</sup> The Council launched the newspaper, titling it the *Cherokee Phoenix*, and hired Worcester as the publisher and Elias Boudinot, a young Cherokee man, as the editor.<sup>27</sup> Boudinot, Major Ridge's nephew, had been educated at a New England college and was acting as a schoolteacher and missionary in the Cherokee Nation when he was tabbed as editor.<sup>28</sup>

Right away, Worcester and Boudinot drew up the newspaper's prospectus, and Boudinot travelled up and down the East Coast to court potential subscribers and philanthropic donors.<sup>29</sup> The prospectus for the paper described the mission as "this feeble effort of the Cherokees to rise from their ashes."<sup>30</sup> The paper was to have dual audiences, the Cherokee people within the nation and people from the outside who needed to be persuaded that the Cherokees should be allowed sovereignty. In an address to sympathetic whites at the First Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, Boudinot described the plans for the paper.<sup>31</sup> The *Phoenix* would publish content on Cherokee laws, religious practices, and political events.<sup>32</sup> Through open and free discourse over internal affairs, primarily in Cherokee, Boudinot envisioned that the paper would empower the Cherokee

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<sup>25</sup> Murphy and Murphy, 23.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Carstarphen, 64.

<sup>31</sup> Boudinot, 167-176.

<sup>32</sup> Boudinot, 173.



people to become active in their nation's government and civic life.<sup>33</sup> Simultaneously, through English articles, targeted to interested whites, American citizens and policy shapers would be educated about the worth of the Cherokee Nation and the merits of its legal sovereign rights.<sup>34</sup> "To obtain a correct and complete knowledge of these people," Boudinot told his Philadelphia audience, "there must exist a vehicle of Indian intelligence altogether different than those which have heretofore been employed."<sup>35</sup>

The *Phoenix*, buoyed by support from outside fundraising, immediately began publishing high quality issues. According to historian Samuel Carter III, "Physically, the *Phoenix* stacked up well against the newspapers of New York and Philadelphia, New England and the South."<sup>36</sup> The *Phoenix* spread its message far and wide. Murphy and Murphy detail the extent of the *Phoenix*'s reach:

The *Phoenix*, acclaimed throughout the world in its brief lifetime, had subscribers in Germany, Paris, and London. It had sales and advertising agent in Boston, New York, Richmond, and Troy...and exchanged issues with such newspapers as the *National Intelligencer*, the *New Hampshire Patriot and State Gazette*, and the *Milledgeville (Georgia) Journal*...non-Indian as well as Indian papers frequently reprinted materials from the *Phoenix*.<sup>37</sup>

The elegant and aggressive prose of Boudinot's editorials provided the backbone of the *Phoenix* and made the paper into a powerful voice for its people. Boudinot defiantly defended the rights of the Cherokee in powerful arguments. Boudinot argued that the Cherokees had been given false promises that civilizing their society would lead to acceptance from whites, writing in an 1829 editorial: "Perhaps Washington, Jefferson,

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<sup>33</sup> Boudinot, 174.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Samuel Carter III, *Cherokee Sunset: A Nation Betrayed: A Narrative of Travail Triumph, Persecution, and Exile* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), 67.

<sup>37</sup> Murphy and Murphy, 27.

Madison and Monroe were only tantalizing us when they encouraged us in the pursuit of agriculture and government... The Cherokees have always had a government of their own. Nothing, however, was said when we were governed by savage laws.”<sup>38</sup> In another editorial, responding to calls from Georgian whites for the Cherokees to submit to their “destiny” of removal, Boudinot asked, “What destiny? To be slandered and then butchered?”<sup>39</sup> In arguing the Cherokee cause to the outside world, Boudinot and the *Phoenix* created and distributed an effective, unified and persuasive message that became a significant part of the public debate on the plight of the Cherokee Nation.

Unfortunately, the presentation of the Cherokees argument to outside policy makers came at the cost of the *Phoenix* being a truly free press vehicle that allowed the Cherokee people to debate among themselves what was best for the nation. The Cherokee Constitution did not guarantee a free press, and because the *Phoenix* was publicly owned, the National Council ultimately held sway over its content.<sup>40</sup> Initially, Cherokee leaders claimed they would allow the newspaper and Boudinot editorial freedom, as long as the paper’s opinions aligned with those of the Cherokee people and leadership. When the newspaper was first established in 1827, Chief John Ross had said: “The press being the public property of the nation, it would ill become its character if such infringements upon the feelings of the people should be tolerated. In other respects, the liberty of the press should be as free as the breeze that glides upon the surface.”

This limit on free speech was not a major issue so long as Boudinot’s opinions paralleled those of the Council as it was illegal and considered treasonous to discuss

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<sup>38</sup> Trahant, 7.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 9.

removal in a favorable light.<sup>41</sup> For the first two years of the *Phoenix*'s existence, on the central issue of removal, Boudinot took the same hard-line stance as the Council: complete opposition.<sup>42</sup> But as circumstances changed in the early 1830s, Boudinot's opinion began to evolve.

In 1831, Boudinot struggled to keep the *Phoenix* operational as opposition forces from outside the nation worked to shut the paper down. Although Boudinot, a Cherokee, was the editor of the publication, he relied on many white men to help with running the printing press, supplying paper and ink, and distributing issues.<sup>43</sup> In 1831, Georgia passed a law forcing all non-Cherokees living in Cherokee territory to give an oath of allegiance to the state—which meant a vote in favor of Cherokee removal—or face arrest and imprisonment.<sup>44</sup> Many anti-Cherokees were sure that removing sympathetic whites would destroy the paper because they thought Boudinot was merely a front for the real editor, a white man.<sup>45</sup> Boudinot dismissed this in an editorial: “It has already been stated to the public that The Phoenix was under Cherokee influence. It has never been, nor was it ever intended to be, under the influence of any Missionary or White man.”<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, once white men who refused to take the oath were arrested or were forced to leave Cherokee territory, the production of the *Phoenix* became greatly compromised. White printers of the paper, and most importantly Samuel Worcester, the sympathetic missionary who helped Boudinot with content and was also the Cherokee Nation's

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<sup>41</sup> Trahant, 9.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

postmaster, were arrested and held in prison.<sup>47</sup> At the same time, Georgia state officials were personally threatening and harassing Boudinot and other *Phoenix* staff.<sup>48</sup> Georgia Guard Colonel C.H. Nelson reportedly told Boudinot that although he was not able to prosecute him under state law, if Boudinot kept reporting on the Guard's actions against the Cherokees, "he would tie him to a tree and give him a good whipping."<sup>49</sup> Obviously, the ability of the *Phoenix* to create a product and distribute it was under serious duress.

The following year, in Washington, the Supreme Court and the federal government decided the fate of the Cherokee Nation. In March 1832, Boudinot traveled up to witness Chief Justice John Marshall's landmark ruling in *Worcester v. Georgia*.<sup>50</sup> The Court decided the case in favor of the Cherokees, reversing Georgia state laws, which it claimed violated federal treaties, laws, and the United States Constitution.<sup>51</sup> Boudinot initially reacted to the Court's decision with joy, hailing it as "a great triumph on the part of the Cherokees so far as the question of their rights is concerned."<sup>52</sup> But the Court's decision and the federal government's enforcement decision proved to be completely different matters. The ruling intensified the furor among removal advocates and brought increased pressure on the Cherokees to move.<sup>53</sup> President Andrew Jackson, a former Indian fighter and ardent supporter of Indian removal, refused to enforce the Court's decision and instead continued to execute Indian removal policies.<sup>54</sup> After seeing that even the Supreme Court ruling would not spare the Cherokees from unstoppable

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<sup>47</sup> Trahant, 9.

<sup>48</sup> Murphy and Murphy, 29.

<sup>49</sup> Trahant, 8.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

removal forces, Boudinot came to believe that there were not options left; the Cherokees needed to negotiate to find the best possible compensation for their homeland.<sup>55</sup> Boudinot was not the only Cherokee to reach the same opinion at this point in time. His uncle, Major Ridge, a powerful Cherokee leader joined a growing minority of Cherokees who thought the writing was on the wall and began to urge negotiations.<sup>56</sup> By coming to this conclusion, which ran contrary to the views of Chief John Ross and the National Council, Boudinot knew that there was no chance that he would be able to retain his position as editor of the *Phoenix*.<sup>57</sup>

Historian Meta G. Carstarphen argues that contrary to any claims otherwise, from the Council never intended for the *Cherokee Phoenix* to be a free press.<sup>58</sup> Rather, the Council created the newspaper purely for public relations with the outside world.<sup>59</sup> Carstarphen argues that instead of “provincially serv[ing] the needs of its citizens, the way small-town newspapers focus intently on their own environs,” the Council wanted the *Phoenix* to only “permit white audiences a controlled view of Cherokee life.”<sup>60</sup> In the battle over which of the *Phoenix*’s two missions came first, the Council chose public relations over public discourse. In calling for the removal of Boudinot from the editorship, Chief John Ross argued:

The views of the public authorities should continue and ever be in accordance with the will of the people; and the views of the editor of the national paper be the same. The toleration of diversified views to the columns of such a paper would not fail to create fermentation and confusion among our citizens, and in the end prove injurious to the welfare of the nation.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Trahant, 9.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>58</sup> Carstarphen, 59.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 60.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 60-61.

<sup>61</sup> Trahant, 10.

Boudinot disagreed with the Council's decision, as he strongly believed that the *Phoenix* should be used not only to advocate on behalf of the Cherokee people, but also be used by the Cherokee people to consider all sides of important issues, even ones as controversial as removal.<sup>62</sup> Through civil discourse in the newspaper, Boudinot believed the Cherokee people could form their own opinions and come to their own conclusions rather than be dictated to by the Council.<sup>63</sup> By allowing both sides of the argument into the newspaper, Boudinot believed that factioning of the Cherokees might be prevented.<sup>64</sup> But this was not to be. In his August 1832 resignation letter, which he printed in the *Phoenix*, Boudinot wrote:

Were I to continue as editor, I should feel myself in a most peculiar and delicate situation. I do not know whether I could, at the same time, satisfy my own views, and the views of the authorities of the nation. My situation would then be as embarrassing as it would be peculiar and delicate. I do conscientiously believe it to be the duty of every citizen to reflect upon the dangers with which we are surrounded; to view the darkness which seems to lie before our people—our prospects, and the evils with which we are threatened; to talk over all these matters, and, if possible, come to some definite and satisfactory conclusion.<sup>65</sup>

Chief Ross replaced Boudinot as editor with his brother-in-law Elijah Hicks, who was clearly loyal the Ross party line.<sup>66</sup> But Hicks lacked Boudinot's experience and rhetorical skills. Murphy and Murphy write, simply: "Hicks was a weak writer and editor."<sup>67</sup> Under Hicks' leadership, the *Phoenix* lost its persuasiveness and clearly no

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<sup>62</sup> Trahant, 10.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Murphy and Murphy, 30.

<sup>67</sup> Murphy and Murphy, 31.

longer printed the full truth of the Cherokee's situation. After losing its former credibility and readership, in May 1834, the *Cherokee Phoenix* shut down permanently.<sup>68</sup>

With the *Phoenix* gone as a means of civil political discourse among the Cherokee people and leadership, the argument over removal deteriorated into irreparable factioning. Boudinot joined with Major Ridge and other tribal leaders to form what would later be called the Treaty Party, which favored negotiation, in opposition to the Ross Party, which favored continued resistance to removal.<sup>69</sup> Georgian lawmakers had made it illegal for the Cherokees to meet or hold elections, so it was unclear where the majority of the Cherokee people actually leaned on the issue.<sup>70</sup> Regardless, in December 1835, against the wishes of Chief Ross, and under the threat of death for treason, the men in the Treaty Party signed a removal treaty with the federal government and agreed to move the Cherokee Nation to Indian Territory in present-day Oklahoma.<sup>71</sup> In signing the treaty, Boudinot wrote: "I know that I take my life into my hand, as our fathers have also done... Oh what is a man worth who will not die for his people? Who is there here that will not perish, if this great Nation may be saved?"

After the brutal 1838 federal removal of the Cherokees to Oklahoma, later called the Trail of Tears, the division within the Cherokee Nation continued. In June 1839, a group of Cherokee men sympathetic to Ross rode up to Boudinot's residence. The men stabbed Boudinot in the back with a knife and severed his head with a hatchet. According

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<sup>68</sup> Murphy and Murphy, 31.

<sup>69</sup> Trahant, 12.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

to his lifelong friend Samuel Worcester, “In his own view he [Boudinot] risked his life to save his people from ruin, and he realized his fears.”<sup>72</sup>

Native journalist Mark Trahant, former editor of the *Navajo Times* and president of the Native American Journalists Association has written:

The story of the *Phoenix* illustrates the central quandary of tribal journalism today. Does a tribal newspaper serve its community by printing discourse? Or, does it aid the enemies of tribal government by revealing a community’s weakness? This debate is no more resolved now than when Boudinot died.<sup>73</sup>

The choice between public relations and public discourse continues to challenge tribally owned and operated newspapers, which still make up the majority of local news outlets in Indian Country. Trahant’s own confrontations with this choice during his editorship of the *Navajo Times* are the subject of the next chapter. In Indian Country, freedom of the press is never a guarantee. And many times, as in the case of the *Phoenix*, extenuating circumstances both from outside and inside a tribe can destroy free and open discourse.

### *Wassaja*

In 1915, Charles Eastman, a Santee Sioux and prominent Indian rights activist, described Dr. Carlos Montezuma as “a strong warrior for our race.”<sup>74</sup> In his lifetime, Montezuma, a Yavapai Apache from Southern Arizona, witnessed vast changes in the landscape of Indian Country. When he was born in the 1860s—given the name Wassaja—meaning “the signal,” by his Apache parents—Arizona was still largely unoccupied by Americans and other non-Indians.<sup>75</sup> Before Wassaja could live very long

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<sup>72</sup> Trahant, 12.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Iverson, 93.

<sup>75</sup> Iverson, 3.



among his people, he was kidnapped by neighboring Pima Indians and adopted away by a white man from Illinois, Carlos Gentile, who renamed him, Carlos Montezuma.<sup>76</sup>

Montezuma was raised and became quite successful in white society—he attended the University of Illinois, obtained a medical degree, and became a practicing physician—but he retained his Indian identity and remained invested in the lives of Indian people.<sup>77</sup>

Throughout his life, Montezuma took strong stances, spoke his mind, and wrote critically about the state of Indian affairs.

Much of Montezuma's life occurred during a largely forgotten era of American Indian history, after the Wounded Knee massacre in 1890 and before the Indian New Deal reforms of the 1930s.<sup>78</sup> The Indian Wars in the Great Plains and Southwest were over. Once great Indian nations and empires were now contained in reservations, their populations and resources dwindling. In *Indians in Unexpected Places*, cultural historian Philip J. Deloria describes the turn of the twentieth century as “a moment of paradox and opportunity” for American Indians.<sup>79</sup> In spite of these crisis situations, the national moment of modernization also provided some now largely forgotten Indians the opportunity to create new modern and still distinctly Indian identities. In early twentieth century American culture, new Indian personalities began to produce a modern indigenous discourse. Deloria details the lives contemporaries of Montezuma—singers, athletes, activists and writers—who confronted the modern world with Indian identities. He describes their efforts, writing: “Indian people reworked a sense of distinctiveness and difference, fighting off the colonizing ways the United States sought to include them, and

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<sup>76</sup> Iverson, 7.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>78</sup> Philip J. Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2004), 225.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 225.

demanding a very particular kind of inclusion, one based on unique political status.”<sup>80</sup> As an Apache man raised and educated in American society, Montezuma aligned himself with this fight, understanding both the need to enter modernity and the desire to retain an authentic “Indianness.”<sup>81</sup>

Questions over how to solve the “Indian Problem,” however, remained unresolved. Were Indians a “vanishing race” that was destined to either die off or assimilate into the American mainstream? Were Indians static, primitive, dependent beings or were they capable of modernizing? Was it possible for them to live both modern and distinctly Indian lives? And what role was the federal government to play in aiding individual Indians and Indian nations? Policy makers in Washington and Indian rights advocacy groups debated all of these questions. Before the early twentieth century, very few if any people in these debates were actually Indians, and those who were generally were used as tokens rather than valued for their opinions.<sup>82</sup>

On Columbus Day in 1911, a group of “Indian progressives” met in Columbus, Ohio to form the Society of American Indians (SAI).<sup>83</sup> Philip J. Deloria describes the SAI as “perhaps the first modern intertribal political organization,” which “sought to weld together a coherent Indian political response to the issues that affected individuals, tribes, and Indians as a whole.”<sup>84</sup> Composed of mostly boarding school or university educated Indian men, the SAI advocated for pan-Indianism and the assimilation and advancement

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<sup>80</sup> Deloria, 237.

<sup>81</sup> Iverson, 175.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 66.

<sup>83</sup> Deloria, 226.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, 226-227.

of Indian people.<sup>85</sup> Montezuma helped to found the SAI, recognizing the need for an Indian organization separate from the philanthropic and predominantly Anglo groups that predominated Indian policy discussions.<sup>86</sup> By that point, Montezuma had already established himself as a strong voice in Indian affairs, advocating for better education and empowerment of Indians and against the corrupt powers of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA).<sup>87</sup> Montezuma contributed articles to the SAI's quarterly journal, *The American Indian Magazine*, attended regular meetings, and corresponded with fellow members.<sup>88</sup>

By 1915, however, Montezuma determined that the SAI was acting too cautiously and was wrongly compromising and working within the bounds of the failed Bureau of Indian Affairs. Montezuma had witnessed how badly BIA officials on the Ft. McDowell Reservation in Arizona were treating his native Yavapai Apache people. He had also become dismayed over what he saw as the deteriorating state of Indian education, the lack of Indian self-government, and continued dispossession of Indian property and disenfranchisement of Indian people. In order to best empower Indians moving forward, Montezuma knew that the BIA as it currently existed needed to be abolished.

On September 30, 1915, Montezuma delivered an address to the SAI entitled "Let My People Go." The speech sharply attacked the SAI and articulated his vision for Indian freedom and self-determination.<sup>89</sup> Decrying his fellow SAI members, Montezuma said:

The Society of American Indians has met and met. This coming together every year has been the mere routine of shaking hands, appointing committees, listening to papers, hearing discussions, passing a few resolutions, electing officers, then reorganizing—that has been the extent of our outlook and usefulness to our race.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Iverson, 63.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 64.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 67.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, 105.

Under the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Montezuma argued, “The slimy clutches of horrid greed and selfish interests are gripping the Indian’s property.”<sup>91</sup> According to Montezuma, Indians living on reservations were little more than prisoners shackled by the B.I.A. and barred from freedom over their own affairs and well-being.<sup>92</sup> He made an early argument for tribal sovereignty, saying that Indians needed to be given control over their own destinies. Montezuma said:

If we depend upon the employees of the Indian Bureau for our life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness, we wait a long while. They are too busy looking after the machinery of Indian Affairs; they have no time to look ahead; they have no time to feel the pulse of the Indian; they have no time to think of outside matters; they have no time to adjust matters...All of their time is devoted to the pleasure and will of their master at Washington, that we call the Indian Bureau.<sup>93</sup>

Invoking the Biblical Moses, Montezuma demanded: “United States of America—‘Let My People Go.’”<sup>94</sup>

Montezuma defected from the SAI in early 1916 and began to publish his own monthly newsletter, *Wassaja*—based on his Apache name.<sup>95</sup> According to biographer Peter Iverson, “In *Wassaja*, Montezuma found the ideal medium through which to carry out his crusade.”<sup>96</sup> At the time of *Wassaja*’s launch, Montezuma wrote in a letter to his friend L.V. McWhorter: “For many years I have looked on without saying anything. I am criticized for being too harsh and too radical. If people realize as I do they would be more so than I am...In my feeble way, I have to present the true position of the Indians.”<sup>97</sup> The

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<sup>90</sup> Carlos Montezuma, “Let My People Go,” *The American Indian Magazine*, January 1916, 32.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>95</sup> Iverson, 106.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Iverson, 106.

publication allowed Montezuma to freely write uncompromising editorials and polemics while also printing news on Indian life from across the nation.<sup>98</sup> Although he struggled to find funding—he charged very little for subscriptions and accepted no advertising—Montezuma published an issue each month until his death in 1922.<sup>99</sup>

During his six years publishing *Wassaja*, Montezuma covered many important topics. He lambasted the Bureau of Indian Affairs for mismanagement, corruption, and sheer incompetence.<sup>100</sup> His critics argued that Montezuma failed to conceptualize a better alternative to the BIA.<sup>101</sup> But he called for “Indian freedom” and espoused a firm belief that Indians deserved autonomy.<sup>102</sup> Freed from the chains of the BIA, Montezuma argued, Indians would finally be able to reach their full potential. This did not mean assimilating into the United States and abandoning a separate Indian identity. And it did not mean reverting to a primitive or anti-modern lifestyle. In an editorial in the September 1916 issue of *Wassaja*, Montezuma wrote:

Fennimore Cooper’s Indians do not exist today. We are their children’s children. Things have changed and we have changed with them. We do not see things as our forefathers saw them not do we live as they did. Let it be known that within the breast of every Indian there is a heart which throbs with the same yearnings that throb in all human kind.<sup>103</sup>

Indians, in Montezuma’s view, deserved to achieve truly modern lives in societies that allowed them power over their own affairs.

*Wassaja* included news stories on Indian legislation considered in Washington and controversies and disputes erupting across Indian Country.<sup>104</sup> Of personal interest to

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<sup>98</sup> Iverson, 107.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 106.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 107.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 105.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 111.

Montezuma were the land and water disputes of his people in Arizona.<sup>105</sup> Montezuma fought to preserve the Yavapai's homeland and resources as white settlers and bureau officials in the growing Phoenix metropolitan area continued to strip them away. But Montezuma did not limit himself to advocacy only for the Yavapais. He even campaigned for the Yavapai's old enemies and neighboring Pimas and Maricopas. In 1912 letters, Montezuma wrote, "I am interested in the Pimas as much as I am in the McDowell [Yavapai] Indians...I want the Pimas and Apaches always to be friends and brothers. 40 years time has changed our thoughts for each other. Today we are brothers of the same blood. We are under the same cloud of trouble and must help each other."<sup>106</sup> Through *Wassaja*, Montezuma expressed pan-Indian sentiments, calling for Indians from all tribes across Indian Country to work together. He attempted to speak for all Indian tribes and peoples focusing in on as many specific stories as he could. Examples were stories about Indian boarding schools, misappropriation of Indian culture in Wild West shows, and poor treatment of Indians by missionary churches.<sup>107</sup> Although he was inherently limited by the scope of his operations—he predominantly covered Arizona tribes over others he knew less well and had less access to—Montezuma's desire to bring all Indians together against the BIA and for each other rang true.<sup>108</sup>

*Wassaja*'s largest crusade—other than that against the BIA—focused on the quest for Indian citizenship. During World War I, The American military drafted American

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<sup>104</sup> Iverson, 111.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid, 121.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, 121-122.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid, 112.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 123.

Indians even though they were not American citizens .<sup>109</sup> In the brutally violent war, Montezuma saw a lens through which he could criticize the United States' unjust treatment of Indians and call for Indians' fair treatment under the law. "Indian Bureauism," Montezuma wrote in a 1917 editorial, "is the Kaiserism of America toward the Indians."<sup>110</sup> In a cartoon published in the same issue, Sitting Bull—the famous Lakota warrior chief—looked upon the carnage of a World War I battle scene and said "And They Called Us Savages!"<sup>111</sup> Yet the brutality was not the main reason Montezuma opposed the war. He protested because Indians who were not afforded American citizenship were being forced to fight.<sup>112</sup> In an editorial titled "Drafting Indians and Justice," Montezuma wrote:

WASSAJA believes that this drafting of Indians into the army is another wrong perpetrated upon the Indian without FIRST bestowing his just title—THE FIRST AMERICAN CITIZEN. Why not? He was here before Columbus, he was here before Washington, he was here before Lincoln, and he was here before you came.<sup>113</sup>

Montezuma argued that Indians needed to be recognized as American citizens so they could receive the same rights and protections under law as the later inhabitants of their homeland.<sup>114</sup> But while gaining American citizenship, Montezuma argued, Indians needed to be able to retain their tribal citizenship and the treaty rights that went along with it. Montezuma believed Indians had the right to live as dual citizens within the "nations within the nation" that tribes had become.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Iverson, 113.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid, 114.

Critics of Montezuma believed his rhetoric and style were too extreme and radical to produce any substantive change.<sup>116</sup> His uncompromising nature created enemies both within the Bureau he opposed and among more moderate Indian rights activists.<sup>117</sup> Montezuma faced many threats of violence from those he opposed and exposed in his writing.<sup>118</sup> His failure to moderate led many to dismiss him or react to him with vindictiveness.<sup>119</sup> Beyond damaging his personal relationships and influence, his biting style may have also lessened the readership of *Wassaja*.<sup>120</sup> But the extreme tone also made people pay him attention. *Wassaja*'s message had an audience and an impact. Although he had defected from the Society of American Indians, Montezuma still had sympathizers in the organization that held sway over Indian policy debates.<sup>121</sup> Even Indian Bureau officials who detested him were forced to listen to his points and respond to the problems he exposed.<sup>122</sup> While he was making his arguments, Montezuma may have seemed radical and out of the mainstream, but the substance of his points carried weight that stood the test of time and proved to improve future Indian policies.

Montezuma did not live to see most of the positive changes that resulted from his activism. In 1922, he fell sick to tuberculosis and returned home to the Ft. McDowell Reservation to die among his people.<sup>123</sup> He printed the last issue of *Wassaja* just over a month before his death in January 1923.<sup>124</sup> Much of what Montezuma had advocated for came to pass. The Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 declared that all Indians born within the

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<sup>116</sup> Iverson, 175.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid, 175.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid, 176.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, 175.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid, 173.



territorial limits of the United States would henceforth be American citizens while continuing to hold tribal citizenship and privileges.<sup>125</sup> A new generation of Indian reformers arose during the 1920s and 1930s influenced by Montezuma to investigate problems within reservations and the BIA's operations and empower Indians to take control of their own affairs.<sup>126</sup> The 1928 Meriam Report produced by the Institute for Government Research examined the social and economic conditions of Indians and made detailed recommendations for solutions that largely aligned with points earlier raised in *Wassaja*.<sup>127</sup> The report, which would be used for decades afterward to shape Indian policy, said: "In every activity of the Indian Service the primary question should be, how is the Indian to be trained so that he will do this for himself."<sup>128</sup> This concept—which Montezuma had labeled "Indian freedom"—would go on to be the basis of the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 and later the tribal sovereignty reforms of the 1970s.<sup>129</sup>

The following excerpt from a 1916 *Wassaja* editorial best encapsulates Montezuma's enduring legacy:

Who says the Indian race is vanishing?  
The Indians will not vanish.  
The feathers, paint and moccasin will vanish, but the Indians,—never!  
Just as long as there is a drop of human blood in America,  
the Indians will not vanish.  
His spirit is everywhere; the American Indian will not vanish.  
He has changed externally but he is not vanished.  
He is an industrial and commercial man, competing with the world;  
He has not vanished.  
Whenever you see an Indian upholding the standard of his race, there you see the  
Indian man—he has not vanished.

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<sup>125</sup> "Indian Citizenship Act," in *Documents of United States Indian Policy*, ed. Francis Paul Prucha (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 218.

<sup>126</sup> Iverson, 183.

<sup>127</sup> "Meriam Report" in *Documents of United States Indian Policy*, ed. Francis Paul Prucha (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 219.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid, 221.

<sup>129</sup> Iverson, 183.

The man part of the Indian is here, there and everywhere.  
The Indian race vanishing?  
No, never! The race will live on and prosper forever.<sup>130</sup>

### **Lessons Learned**

Although these two newspapers emerged from distinct historical contexts separated by nearly a century of changes in Indian Country, they each demonstrated the unique challenges that later Native journalists and publications would face. The pressure and high stakes of covering the news in Indian Country did not disappear after the *Cherokee Phoenix* fell into ashes. Indian Country is still a diverse collection of hundreds of different tribes and peoples. Conflicting factions still divide most individual tribes conflicting factions. Attempting to speak freely about and for the benefit of such complex and diverse peoples continues to vex Native publications. Journalists must also consider questions of how to best capture an authentic picture of “Indianness,” while reconciling indigeneity, tradition, and modernity. In working to advocate for the betterment of Indians’ lives, publications need to decide between having a confrontational and protesting approach or one of accommodation and compromise. Most importantly, as the short lives of the *Phoenix* and *Wassaja* show, Native journalists need to strive to keep their publications afloat and themselves alive in the dangerous business that is covering the news in Indian Country.

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<sup>130</sup> Iverson, 185.

## Chapter Two

### Fight for Freedom of the Press



*"The Navajo Nation shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Navajo Nation government for a redress of their grievances."*<sup>1</sup>

—Navajo Nation Bill of Rights (1967)

# NAVAJO TIMES

## NEWSPAPER OF THE NAVAJO PEOPLE

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*"The contribution that we make, and it's not only just to the Navajo people, but also to Native journalists everywhere across Indian Country, is really being an advocate for practice in freedom of the press. Actually going out and doing it and going through all the struggles, fighting the battles to make sure that it's allowed."*<sup>2</sup>

—Tom Arviso, Jr., Publisher of the *Navajo Times* (2011)

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<sup>1</sup> David E. Wilkins, *The Navajo Political Experience* (New York: Roman and Littlefield, 2003), 172-173.

<sup>2</sup> Tom Arviso, Jr., "The Navajo Times," *Who Needs Newspapers?*, accessed January 1, 2013, [http://whoneedsnewspapers.org/np\\_interviews.php?npId=aznt&ivId=aznt01](http://whoneedsnewspapers.org/np_interviews.php?npId=aznt&ivId=aznt01).

On February 19, 1987, five armed Navajo tribal police officers entered the offices of the *Navajo Times* to shut down the paper.<sup>3</sup> Under orders from Chairman Peter MacDonald and the Navajo Tribal Council, the officers dismissed the entire staff of the tribal newspaper and padlocked the machines.<sup>4</sup> The police walked in right before the day's final edition of the paper was scheduled to go to press.<sup>5</sup> Monty Roessel, the managing editor of the paper later told the *Washington Post*, "We wanted to write our own obituary if we could get the final edition out. But then the police handed us memos, telling us we were terminated. We were told to get out and take our personal possessions because we wouldn't be coming back."<sup>6</sup>

Since 1959, the *Navajo Times* had served as the Navajo Nation's official newspaper.<sup>7</sup> Like the many other tribal papers that sprouted up in the 1960s and 1970s, the *Times* was supported financially by tribal government funds.<sup>8</sup> For its first years, the paper operated as a mouthpiece for the tribal council and looked like a public relations publication.<sup>9</sup> But over time, editors and writers struggled for more freedom and editorial control. Federal and tribal statutes in the late 1960s established the freedom of the press as a right in the Navajo Nation, at least on paper.<sup>10</sup> The *Times* officially became

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<sup>3</sup> Sarah Helm, "Death of a Daily Newspaper: Deficits or Tribal Politics?," *Washington Post*, September 3, 1987, A3.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> James E. Murphy and Sharon M. Murphy, *Let My People Know: American Indian Journalism, 1828-1978* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981), 91.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 92.

<sup>10</sup> "Civil Rights Act of 1968, Section 202" in *Documents of United States Indian Policy*, ed. Francis Paul Prucha (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 250. "Navajo Nation Bill of Rights, Section 4" in *The Navajo Political Experience*, David E. Wilkins (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 246.

independent from the Navajo Tribal Council in 1972, but it retained its close ties to council officials and its government funding base.<sup>11</sup>

When a progressive candidate, Peterson Zah, ousted the long-serving conservative Peter MacDonald from the tribal chairmanship in 1982, he pushed for improvement and independence for the tribal newspaper.<sup>12</sup> He appointed new leadership to the *Times*.<sup>13</sup> After taking over, the immediately began to change the culture of the publication, hiring more Navajo staff and publishing critical editorials, investigative reporting, and diverse opinion pieces.<sup>14</sup> MacDonald regained power in 1986 in a narrow election victory.<sup>15</sup> In his first year back in office, MacDonald cut funding for the newspaper, laid off its staff, and sent in the tribal police.<sup>16</sup> He claimed his reasons were financial, but most observers knew political censorship when they saw it.<sup>17</sup> Months after the shuttering of the windows of the *Times*' office, the newspaper began to hit the newsstands again. But it had reverted back to its old ways, publishing weekly press releases and puff pieces from the Council.<sup>18</sup>

The full history of the *Navajo Times*, including this episode, reveals how stifled the freedom of the press can be in tribal journalism. It also raises questions over what the purpose of a tribal newspaper should be and who are its intended audiences. Are tribal newspapers supposed to merely inform tribal members and federal officials of good news from the reservation, or should they invest in investigative muckraking journalism that exposes the flaws in tribal life and government? Should they act as boosters for the tribe

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<sup>11</sup> Murphy and Murphy, 92.

<sup>12</sup> Wilkins, 174.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Wilkins, 175.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

or seek to tell unbiased and honest stories? And is it possible to have editorial and journalistic independence without guaranteed freedom of the press or financial support from non-government revenues?

### **The Early *Times***

The Navajo Education Committee published the first issue of the *Navajo Times* in November 1959.<sup>19</sup> The 1950s had been the best and worst of times for the Navajos. The Navajo Nation began to emerge as an indigenous and economic power.<sup>20</sup> The Nation made huge advances by incorporating chapters, creating tribal scholarship programs, establishing tribal courts, and discovering significant supplies of oil, gas, and uranium.<sup>21</sup> The decade also saw a rise in the tourism industry as the tribe finally began to reap benefits from their homeland's beautiful scenery.<sup>22</sup> But all was not well. Uranium mining would have long-lasting harmful environmental and health effects on the Navajo land and people would be felt for decades.<sup>23</sup> The Navajo-Hopi land dispute intensified.<sup>24</sup> And, perhaps most importantly, the executive branch of the tribal government began amassing incredible, unchecked power.<sup>25</sup> Creating a mouthpiece newspaper was one means of asserting the tribal government's newfound power.

The Tribal Council initially created the *Navajo Times* to educate the Navajo people and children about their tribal government and to foster a cohesive cultural identity. But the Council also created the newspaper to demonstrate the many good deeds and projects that the tribal leadership was undertaking. The editorial page in the first

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<sup>19</sup> *The Navajo Times*, November 1959.

<sup>20</sup> Wilkins, 173.

<sup>21</sup> Wilkins, 173.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Wilkins, 173.

issue shows the Navajo Council's intent in starting the newspaper. Editor Dillon Platero wrote:

The primary purpose of the newspaper is to serve the 6,000 Navajo children who are attending off-reservation schools. It is hoped that this paper will keep them informed about what is happening on their Reservation. It is also hoped that this is a step toward supplying the Navajo people with an ever-increasing flow of information.<sup>26</sup>

Tribal Chairman Paul Jones penned a letter to the Navajo people, saying: "Your Tribal leaders have long recognized that the lack of adequate communications is a serious drawback to our progress. I am hopeful that this monthly publication will bring you interesting reviews of all phases of Tribal government and other activities."<sup>27</sup> Both of these messages were aimed at the Navajo people. They each promoted dissemination of knowledge about the tribe's affairs. But they also expressed a hope that the newspaper would bring enlightenment to all Navajo people—who were infantilized and at that point viewed as no more educated than schoolchildren—and turn them into a more informed tribal citizenry.

The Navajo people were not the only target audience. The Council believed that the newspaper was as yet another way to demonstrate to the outside world that the Navajo Nation was modernizing and progressing. This was important because the outside world was threatening the existence of tribes across Indian Country. Starting in the 1950s, the federal government began to implement termination policies aimed at ending federal recognition and assistance of tribes and assimilating Indians into the mainstream

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<sup>26</sup> Dillon Platero, "Editorial: The Navajo Times...", *Navajo Times*, November 1959, 2.

<sup>27</sup> Paul Jones, "A Message from Chairman Jones," *Navajo Times*, November 1959, 2.

culture.<sup>28</sup> Tribal governments like the Navajo Council knew that they had to prove that they were competent so they could keep their political positions. Thus there was a strong urge to keep the paper from reporting anything but positive stories.



Fig. 1: The masthead on the first issue of the *Navajo Times*<sup>29</sup>

Images and graphics demonstrated this desire to impress outside audiences. The image on the first masthead of the *Times* (Figure 1) depicted an older Navajo man in traditional clothing looking across the page toward two young Navajos dressed in modern collared shirts suggesting changing times but also a desire to preserve cultural heritage.<sup>30</sup> A cartoon on the editorial page (Figure 2) also challenged assumptions about the “savageness” or “primitiveness” of the Navajo people. A Navajo family dressed in older clothing greets spacemen on the moon with the greeting, “Yá’át’ééh.”<sup>31</sup> As the American people as a whole were looking toward space post-Sputnik—candidate Kennedy would soon literally promise them the moon—the Navajos wanted to be a part of this very modern movement.

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<sup>28</sup> Roberta Ulrich, *American Indian Nations from Termination to Restoration, 1953-2006*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 6.

<sup>29</sup> Masthead, *Navajo Times*, November 1959, 1.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> “As Coyote Sees It,” *Navajo Times*, November 1959, 2.



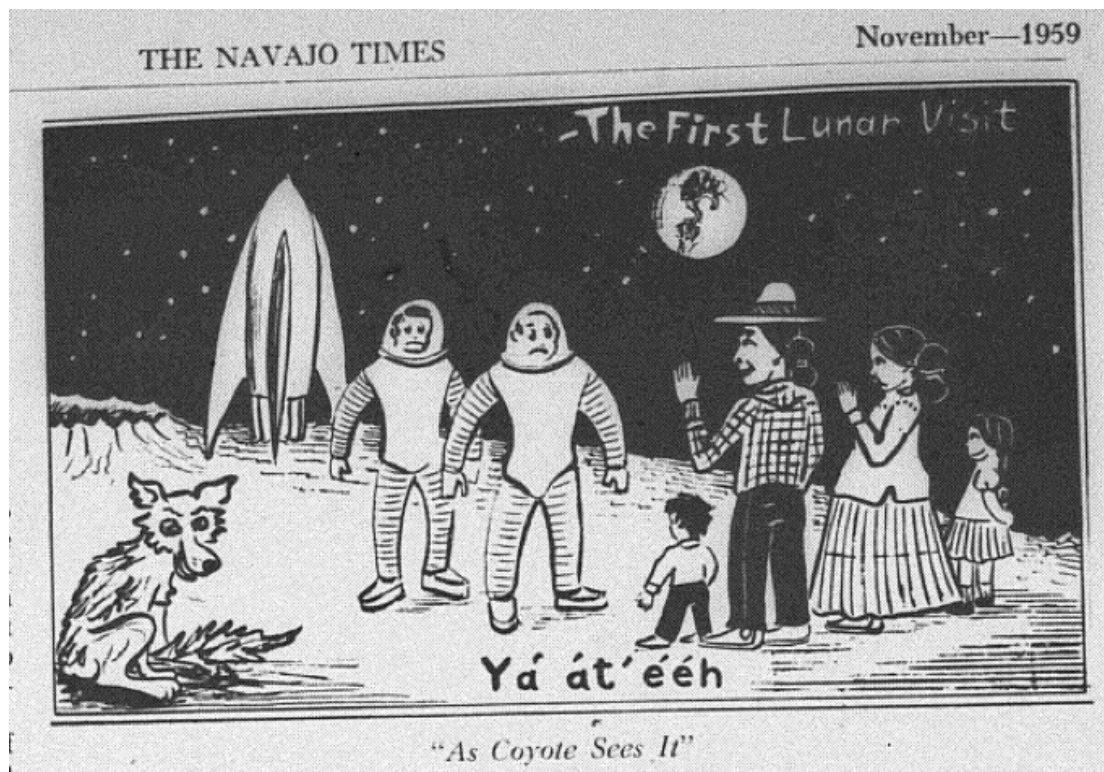


Fig. 2: A cartoon in the first issue with a traditional Navajo family greeting astronauts in on the moon<sup>32</sup>

Early issues of the newspaper featured largely positive stories on Navajo cultural events and educational material on the federal programs and the workings of the Navajo Nation government. Full spreads with large photos were devoted to things like new construction projects, scenery from Navajo National Parks, the Navajo Tribal Fair, prep sports competitions, and the Miss Navajo beauty pageant. Modernizing progress and cultural and political cohesiveness were both common themes in these pages. The *Times*' coverage of the 1960 Navajo Tribal Fair emphasized the fair's theme: "The Navajo Indians in a Changing World."<sup>33</sup>

<sup>32</sup> "As Coyote Sees It."

<sup>33</sup> "Navajo Tribal Fair," *Navajo Times*, September 1960, 14.

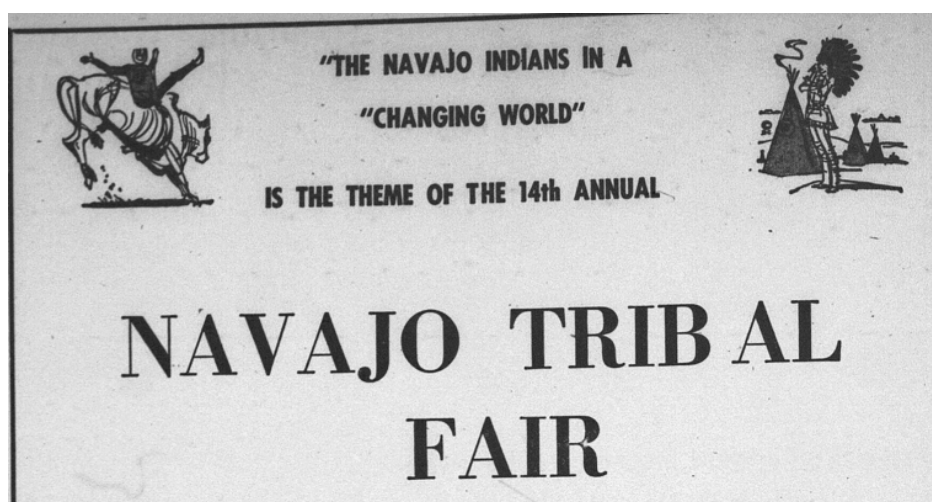


Fig. 3: An advertisement for the 1960 Navajo Tribal Fair<sup>34</sup>

While the *Times* covered standard events like the rodeo and ceremonials, the newspaper also examined the many exhibits and displays highlighting improvements in Navajo public education, housing developments, health programs, and tribal government.<sup>35</sup> Photos showed both traditional artisans weaving baskets and recently constructed education and health facilities.<sup>36</sup> In glowing reviews, the newspaper delivered the tribal government's well-crafted message that the Navajo people were together moving steadily forward into the modern world.

In a new masthead—which would stay on the newspaper for most of the 1960s only to be replaced by simple text and the official tribal government seal—an image reminiscent to John Gast's famous manifest destiny painting, “American Progress” (Figure 5), sent a striking message. In the nineteenth century, American imperialists used the Gast painting to promote westward expansion across the North American continent. The painting showed American settlers moving west and bring the light toward cowering

<sup>34</sup> “Navajo Tribal Fair.”

<sup>35</sup> “Navajo Tribe Fair Readied,” *Navajo Times*, September 1960, 1.

<sup>36</sup> “Photos of Navajo Tribal Fair,” *Navajo Times*, October 1960, 29-32.

and uncivilized American Indians.<sup>37</sup> The *Navajo Times*' masthead image (Figure 4), in a complete reversal, showed an upright Navajo man on a horseback looking confidently toward an oncoming settler in a wagon with a gigantic sun setting over sacred Canyon de Chelly shining its long rays eastward.<sup>38</sup> This invocation and challenge of the Gast image suggests that the Navajo people were standing their ground and finally creating their own progress.



Fig. 4: 1960 masthead with image of a Navajo man facing an American settler<sup>39</sup>



Fig. 5: John Gast's *American Progress*<sup>40</sup>

<sup>37</sup> John Gast, *American Progress*, 1872.

<sup>38</sup> "Masthead," *Navajo Times*, September 1960, 1.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Gast, *American Progress*.

### Free Press or Mouthpiece?

Nearly every headline in the *Times* was an update on a recently completed project or a newly implemented government program. Stories regularly ran about newly paved roads, new power plants, new schools, new everything. Little to no space was devoted to assessing the previous state of these facilities or services. There was no investigative journalism trying to expose the grim realities of life on the reservation; no attempts to find corruption in the tribal government or the local Bureau of Indian Affairs agencies. Instead, the *Times* reprinted progress reports and updates straight from both the tribal government and from BIA officials, with no commentary or analysis.<sup>41</sup> This focus makes sense given that the tribal government hired the editors—usually either Navajo men with little to no journalism training or outsider Anglo men with experience in public relations—and paid for their salaries and the newspaper’s budget using the tribal government and BIA funds.<sup>42</sup> As the “official” news source of the Navajo Nation, the newspaper quite openly and obviously played the role of a mouthpiece, kissing up to the Navajo and federal governments and promoting optimism and investment in all things Navajo.

There may have been even more to it than just who paid the bills for the paper’s operations. Freedom of the press was and is stifled across Indian Country. Tribal newspapers operated—and still do—within jurisdictions that did not necessarily have to abide by public records laws or the first amendment.<sup>43</sup> Tribal governments, like the

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<sup>41</sup> “Monthly Progress Report,” *Navajo Times*, December 1960, 13.

<sup>42</sup> Murphy and Murphy, 92.

<sup>43</sup> Teresa Trumbly Lamsam and Dennis McAuliffe, Jr., “Taking the Mystery Out of Native American Coverage,” in *Journalism Across Cultures*, ed. Fritz Cropp, Cynthia M. Frisby, and Dean Mills (Ames: Iowa State Press, 2003), 148.

Navajo Council, could withhold their records from the press without any retribution.<sup>44</sup>

The federal government could also be rather unresponsive and opaque.<sup>45</sup> The lack of transparency at all levels combined to make it difficult to find information even if determined journalists were inclined to look for it. The government paid the journalists' salaries and held all of the important information. This heavy-handed relationship with the tribal government was not unique to the *Navajo Times*. All of the hundreds of tribal newspapers that started up in the 1960s and 1970s faced these same infringements in press freedom.

Authorities recognized the lack of press liberty, and in the late in the late 1960s, the federal and Navajo governments took steps to guarantee freedom of the press, at least in the books. In 1967, the Navajo Council passed the Navajo Nation Bill of Rights, which stated: "The Navajo Nation Council shall make no law... abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press."<sup>46</sup> Congress followed this up by including a Bill of Rights to Indians in the Civil Rights Act of 1968, which stipulated: "No Indian tribe in exercising powers of self-government shall—make or enforce any law...abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press."<sup>47</sup> Together, these two provisions should have forced tribal governments to allow a more honest criticism and open exchanges of ideas in tribal newspapers. In the case of the *Navajo Times*, the tribal council voted to make the paper officially independent from the government in 1972.<sup>48</sup> Although its budget was still

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<sup>44</sup> Lansam and McAuliffe, 149.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> "Navajo Nation Bill of Rights," in Wilkins, *The Navajo Political Experience*, 246.

<sup>47</sup> "Civil Rights Act of 1968," in *Documents of United States Indian Policy*, ed. Francis Paul Prucha (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 250.

<sup>48</sup> Murphy and Murphy, 91.

largely subsidized by government funds, the *Times* was theoretically an editorially independent publication that had free reign over its content.<sup>49</sup>

Nevertheless, the newspaper kept its close relationship with the tribal government long after gaining its “independence.” For its first two decades, the *Times* editorial staff remained loyal to the Navajo Council. James E. Murphy and Sharon M. Murphy wrote in 1978 that the *Navajo Times* was still “experiencing many of the problems associated with its role as an official publication...[and was] accused by tribal members and editors of other newspapers of being a ‘mouthpiece,’ an uncritical conduit of the party line rather than a free journalistic agent at the service of all factions within the Navajo Nation.”<sup>50</sup>

Throughout the 1970s, the Navajo government, under the chairmanship of Peter MacDonald, had done plenty to raise eyebrows. MacDonald, a dynamic speaker and the first ever university-educated chairman, was first elected to lead the Navajo Nation in 1970.<sup>51</sup> He served three consecutive terms from 1970 through 1982 and amassed immense power in the executive branch.<sup>52</sup> His charisma and leadership attracted national attention during the 1970s.<sup>53</sup> But his tenure was also mired in controversy. In 1971, MacDonald reorganized the tribal government in a way that gave the chairmanship much more authority and power.<sup>54</sup> During his second and third terms, MacDonald inflamed tensions in the Navajo-Hopi land dispute, overstepped his bounds in voting apportionment debates, and was indicted for mismanaging federal funds.<sup>55</sup> During all of

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<sup>49</sup> Murphy and Murphy, 91.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 92.

<sup>51</sup> Wilkins, 90.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Wilkins, 90-91.

this, he retained popularity with a portion of the Navajo people, but lost the support of a growing skeptical faction.<sup>56</sup>

You would have no idea this divide was occurring by reading the *Navajo Times*. MacDonald's towering presence over the Navajo Nation was also clearly felt in the offices of the nation's official newspaper. During MacDonald's tenure, the *Times* continued to act as a mere "roundup of tribal press statements, advertisements and announcements, and ample sports coverage."<sup>57</sup> This 1972 assessment from a dissatisfied critic of the paper, a short-lived independent protest paper, *Diné Baa Hane*, characterizes the way the *Times* operated under MacDonald's thumb:

A journalist's responsibility is to keep a check on the equal balance of power by governmental agencies on behalf of the public. Apathy breeds corruption such as censorship and nepotism... The *Navajo Times*, the largest of the "Indian" newspapers, is governed by policies and resolutions passed by the council and heartily endorsed by the Administration. It more or less acts as a dispersing agent for the power-structure.<sup>58</sup>

The *Times* was too much a part of the tribal government to be able to effectively report on its actions without bias or overly positive spin. The tribal government was not perfectly ethical, and those in control of the government were not representative of all the factions within the Navajo Nation. Because of this, the *Navajo Times* could not possibly hold the administration accountable or represent the best interests of all Navajos as long as it remained a mouthpiece rather than a critical ombudsman.

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<sup>56</sup> Wilkins, 91.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 174.

<sup>58</sup> *Diné Baa Hane*, June 5, 1972 in Murphy and Murphy, 92.

### ***A New Navajo Times***

During the 1982 tribal election, MacDonald's opponent Peterson Zah ran on a reform platform that included revamping the *Navajo Times* and allowing it more editorial freedom.<sup>59</sup> After Zah won the election, the new administration moved to hire a new editorial staff and change policies to allow the newspaper real autonomy.<sup>60</sup> The outgoing MacDonald administration, aware of what might be found by curious journalists, had seen the potential danger in allowing the *Times* to become free and had attempted to sell the lease to the *Times* to MacDonald sympathizer Marshall Tome, who planned to keep the paper's role limited or to kill the paper entirely.<sup>61</sup> But the *Times* staff and the Zah administration killed this attempt in the tribal courts, and the Zah reforms were allowed to pass.<sup>62</sup>

The first step in changing the *Times* was bringing in new leadership to reshape the culture and mission of the newspaper. Less than two months into the new administration, the *Times* hired new management, including Mark Trahant as its new managing editor. Trahant, an enrolled member of the Shoshone-Bannock tribes of the Ft. Hall Reservation in Idaho, had been professionally trained in journalism—learning proper journalistic code and ethics—while obtaining a journalism degree at Idaho State University. He already had experience running a tribal publication, his tribe's *Sho-Ban News*, and a national magazine, *Indian Youth*, as well as writing for a mainstream newspaper, the *Salt Lake Tribune*, and working as a reporter in Washington, DC.<sup>63</sup> The *Times* chose Trahant after

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<sup>59</sup> Wilkins, 174.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> "Restraining order issued against the sale of the Times," *Navajo Times*, January 12, 1983, 9.

<sup>62</sup> Loren Tapahe, "Who Should Own the Times?," *Navajo Times*, May 11, 1983, 4.

<sup>63</sup> Mark Trahant, Oral History Interview with the Author, February 8, 2013.



following his fair and balanced freelance reporting on the 1982 Navajo election, which suggested he would try to cover all sides of stories in an unbiased and inclusive fashion.<sup>64</sup> Within a year, he would be named editor-in-chief and become a pivotal part of the *Times*' new vision and growth. Alongside publisher Loren Tapahe, a Navajo man who believed strongly turning the newspaper into an independent and critical force, Trahan would profoundly change the *Times*.<sup>65</sup> The days of seeking approval from the tribal administration were over. Trahan said, "We operated under the theory that you ask for forgiveness rather than permission."<sup>66</sup>

In an editorial titled "The new *Navajo Times*," Tapahe and Trahan promised to "bring a new awareness to all the people of Navajoland."<sup>67</sup> The new mission of the newspaper was pretty simple: try to represent all of the Navajo people and try to tell the truth rather than scripted pro-government slant.<sup>68</sup> Although tribal funds still largely subsidized the newspaper's budget, the new editorial team believed it would be best for them to cut off any favorable relations between the paper and tribal officials.<sup>69</sup> "When you read this editorial," Tapahe and Trahan promised, "most lines of daily community should have been severed with the tribal administration."<sup>70</sup> Trahan described the new set up as "an adult relationship," in which tribal officials agreed to leave the journalists alone to report the news as they saw it.

Trahan and Tapahe began implementing their new vision for the *Times* by changing the paper's layout and design. The previous masthead (Figure 6) prominently

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Mark Trahan Interview.

<sup>66</sup> Mark Trahan Interview.

<sup>67</sup> Loren Tapahe, "The new Navajo Times," March 23, 1983, 5.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

featured the tribe's official seal, making it look like a government publication.<sup>71</sup> The new masthead (Figure 7) was much more neutral and made the paper look more professional and independent.<sup>72</sup> The opening page of each section also included a small map of the entire Navajo Nation, to demonstrate that the new leadership intended to represent the interests and people from all over the vast reservation, not just those in Window Rock.



Fig. 6: Pre-Trahant and Tapahe era masthead<sup>73</sup>



Fig. 7: The new neutral masthead with a map of the Navajo Nation in the bottom left<sup>74</sup>

Tapahe and Trahant also changed the content of the newspaper to reflect more of what they thought the Navajo people would be interested in rather than the message that the Navajo government wanted to send out. A new Money section was intended to highlight and examine local businesses that were either Navajo-owned or were supported

<sup>71</sup> "Masthead," *Navajo Times*, January 12, 1983, 1.

<sup>72</sup> "Masthead," *Navajo Times*, March 23, 1983, 1.

<sup>73</sup> "Masthead," *Navajo Times*, January 12, 1983, 1

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

by largely Navajo consumers.<sup>75</sup> The editors added an enhanced Sports section and a new Page Two section to give more space in the paper to positive coverage of Navajo youth.<sup>76</sup> Most importantly, a new Opinions section, edited by Trahant, created a new venue for staff writers, editors, and Navajo people to express diverse and critical views on tribal affairs and federal policies.<sup>77</sup> The new leaders of the *Times* promised strong-worded editorials, political cartoons, and letters-to-the-editor that would try to tell the truth and represent views and best interests of the Navajo people.<sup>78</sup> Trahant and Tapahe also committed to providing investigative and skeptical journalism that would try to fairly evaluate all stories from all angles to glean a nuanced truth.<sup>79</sup>

A review of the first years of their efforts reveals that the new leadership largely lived up to their promises. In an effort to make the *Times* more representative of the Navajo people, the new leadership team made a commitment to recruit more Navajo staff. “When we were there,” he said, “everything became Navajo. There had been Navajo writers and indeed an editor before, but not to the same extent.”<sup>80</sup> The new emphasis on training a Navajo staff began a process of “teaching and building capacity within” the Navajo Nation.<sup>81</sup> Trahant and Tapahe recruited young Navajo men and women such as Tom Arviso, Jr. and Betty Reid, who would later become prominent journalists and watchdogs of the tribal government.<sup>82</sup> Having more Navajo staffers led the *Times* to report on more difficult stories and gain the trust of sources who may not

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<sup>75</sup> Tapahe, “The new Navajo Times.”

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Mark Trahant Interview.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

have been as accessible before. It also allowed for more content to be published that came from people who empathized with Navajo issues and represented all Navajo people.<sup>83</sup>

Stories in the *Times* reflected the authenticity of the new staff and the new leadership's mission to investigate and tell stories that mattered to the Navajo people. The new staff embarked on assignments to interview people living across the Navajo Nation, and in more remote areas of the reservation not in close proximity to the *Times*' Window Rock headquarters.<sup>84</sup> *Times* reporters consciously worked to find and interview sources that represented the diverse interests and perspectives around the Nation.<sup>85</sup> The views of MacDonald and Zah supporters, pro-assimilation and pro-traditional, rural and urban voices were all present in interviews and in letters to the editor.

The paper included many more features that presented unfiltered quotes from Navajo people. An example of this was an April 1983 story on Navajo youth (Figure 8) that included a side graphic with quotes from young people at an Indian youth leadership conference on the state of the Navajo Nation and the most important issues facing the tribe.<sup>86</sup> One boy wanted the tribe to “modernize and get more business on the reservation,” while another stressed that “everyone should keep their heritage.”<sup>87</sup> These goals were not necessarily mutually exclusive, but they captured some of the tensions between modernization and preserving a distinct cultural identity.

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Mark Trahant Interview.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Duane A Beyal, “Youth full of ambition, ideas,” April 20, 1983, 2-3.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.



Fig. 8: A feature asking Navajo youth about important issues facing the tribe<sup>88</sup>



Fig. 9: Q & A graphic asking different people about the Navajo-Hopi Land Dispute<sup>89</sup>

<sup>88</sup> Duane A Beyal, "Youth full of ambition, ideas," April 20, 1983, 2.

<sup>89</sup> "Q & A - Negotiations or conflict in land dispute," *Navajo Times*, July 22, 1983, 5.

Similar stories appeared in the paper on topics as light as experiences at the Navajo Fair and sports games and as serious as assessments of the Zah administration's performance, negotiations in the Navajo-Hopi dispute (Figure 9), economic development, and infrastructure and natural resource projects.<sup>90</sup> These stories showed that the *Times* was seeking out, listening to and representing the people rather than the government or special interests.

The new *Navajo Times*, through investigative reporting and critical political cartoons and opinion pieces, exerted pressure on tribal leadership and dug through records to present the truth to readers. Nobody in the public sphere was safe from the critical eye of the *Times* staff. One of the clearest demonstrations of this was the way the paper reported on the former chairman Peter MacDonald, who had previously kept the *Times* in check as a mouthpiece. Reporters from the *Times* looked into papers and records left behind by MacDonald's administration and found cases of corruption and bribery with companies hoping to do business in the Navajo Nation.<sup>91</sup> But the paper did not only trash MacDonald. The *Times* fairly evaluated MacDonald's tenure and enduring influence on the tribe. In an article titled "Mr. MacDonald and Navajo Politics," reporter Duane A. Beyal wrote that the former chairman could correctly be viewed as either "one of the greatest of Navajo leaders or a corrupt politician."<sup>92</sup> Beyal reported that despite his

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<sup>90</sup> "Q & A – Negotiations or conflict in land dispute."

<sup>91</sup> Bill Donovan, "Powers that be...", *Navajo Times*, April 20, 1983, 4.

<sup>92</sup> Duane A. Beyal, "Mr. MacDonald and Navajo Politics," *Navajo Times*, September 7, 1983, 14.

controversial ruling style and questionable ethics, many Navajos and tribal leaders across Indian Country still revered MacDonald and turned to him for guidance.<sup>93</sup>

Coverage of Chairman Peterson Zah was also critical and nuanced. The *Times* tried to gather public opinion on the Zah administration and assess whether its efforts to negotiate with the Hopis, improve economic development, and influence Indian affairs on the national stage were working.<sup>94</sup> A political cartoon of Zah printed after his first year in office gave the chairman a mix of grades on a report card, including a few D's and C's, demonstrating that the *Times* was judging Zah critically (Figure 10).<sup>95</sup>

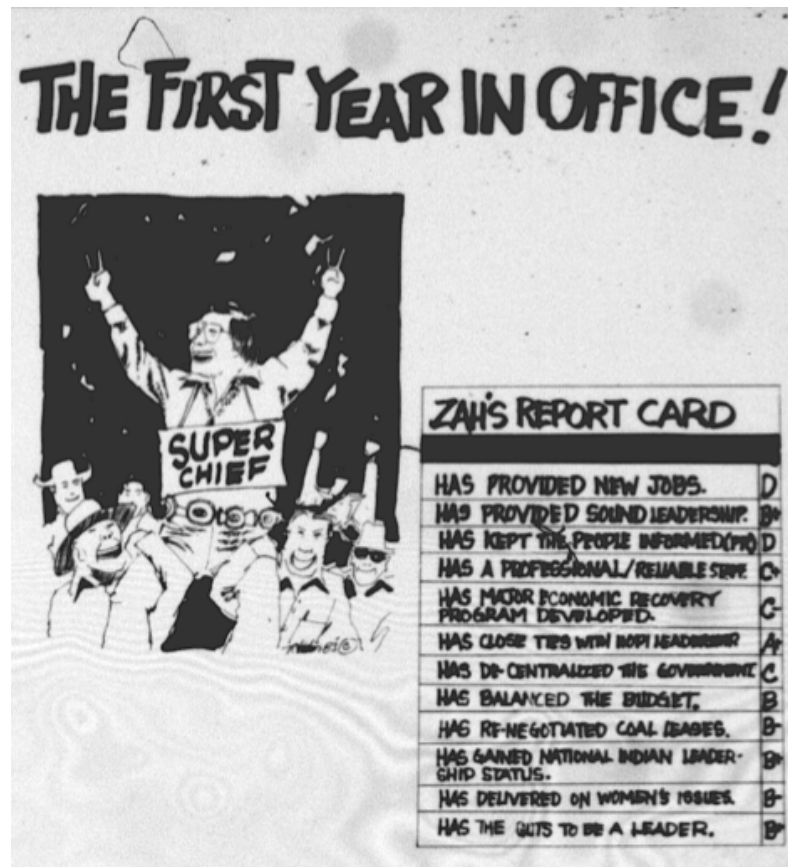


Fig. 10: A report card on Chairman Zah's first year with a less than stellar G.P.A.<sup>96</sup>

<sup>93</sup> Beyal, "Mr. MacDonald and Navajo Politics."

<sup>94</sup> "The First Year in Office," *Navajo Times*, November 30, 1983, 2-4.

<sup>95</sup> "The First Year in Office," *Navajo Times*, November 30, 1983, 2.

<sup>96</sup> "The First Year in Office."

A schism still existed in the Navajo Nation between Zah and MacDonald supporters. But, Trahant said, the *Times* tried to stay neutral and “give the people the information to make their own decisions...get their facts straight, do a good honest reporting job, and let it sort itself out.”<sup>97</sup>

Reporters from the *Times* also tried to cover federal and state politicians who held power over Indian and Navajo affairs. Trahant traveled to Washington, DC to cover the Navajo Nation’s lobbying efforts in the Capital, interview regional congressmen and senators and BIA officials.<sup>98</sup> Critical cartoons lambasted the BIA, Bureau of Land Management, and Reagan administration officials for carrying out what the editors viewed as an unenlightened federal Indian policy.<sup>99</sup> At the same time, local congressmen, governors, and senators sent in letters-to-the editor, wrote guest columns, and provided lengthy interviews to the *Navajo Times*. These political leaders were reading the newspaper and cared about how they were being portrayed in its pages. Politicians from Window Rock to Phoenix to Washington knew the *Navajo Times* was watching them and trying to hold them accountable.

The new formula for the *Times* appeared to be working in moving the paper toward increased readership, profitability and independence. By 1984, after improving its readership to about 20,000 per issue, the *Times* began to publish daily—changing its name to *Navajo Times Today*.<sup>100</sup> At its peak, an estimated 12,000 people read *Navajo*

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<sup>97</sup> Mark Trahant Interview.

<sup>98</sup> Mark Trahant, “Getting things done in the national capital,” *Navajo Times*, December 13, 1983, 4.

<sup>99</sup> W. Richard West Jr., “Watt was insensitive, historically inaccurate, woefully simplistic,” *Navajo Times*, March 9, 1983, 2.

<sup>100</sup> Mark Trahant Interview.



*Times Today* each day.<sup>101</sup> The new look *Times*' masthead (Figure 11) was reminiscent of the recently created *USA Today* newspaper—founded in 1982—suggesting that the *Times* hoped to emulate that paper's mission to objectively cover the news of an entire nation.<sup>102</sup>

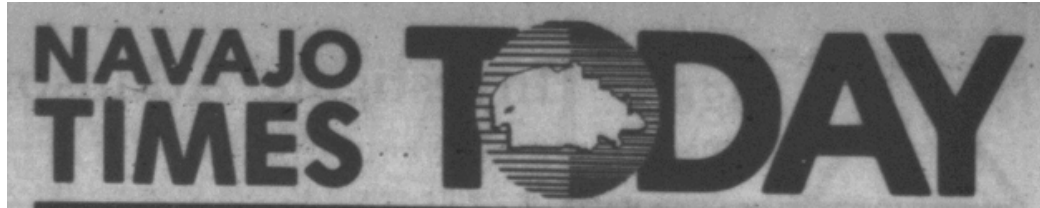


Fig. 11. *Navajo Times Today* masthead reminiscent of the masthead of *USA Today*<sup>103</sup>

To become more independent from the tribal government, Trahant and Tapahe asked Chairman Zah to allow the paper to become a semi-independent enterprise.<sup>104</sup> This step toward complete financial independence allowed the paper to seek more outside revenues and find a way to sustain itself independent from the federal government.<sup>105</sup> The *Times* had always operated at a loss. Before the new leadership took over the paper, Trahant estimated that the paper cost the tribal government as much as \$2,000,000 annually to operate. By the end of the five years in which the new leadership controlled the paper, they had cut the operating losses down to \$800,000 per year and estimated that they would be able to reach healthy profitability within the next two to three years.<sup>106</sup>

By 1987, the *Navajo Times* had become an impressive newspaper. With a relatively small staff of only 100, the *Times* was successfully covering and delivering the news in a geographically and culturally vast territory. The newspaper's work received recognition and earned awards from both tribal news organizations like the Native

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<sup>101</sup> Mark Trahant Interview.

<sup>102</sup> "About Us," *USA Today*, Accessed February 12, 2013, <http://www.usatoday.com/about/>.

<sup>103</sup> "Masthead," *Navajo Times Today*, November 7, 1984, 1.

<sup>104</sup> Loren Tapahe, "Newspaper begins new direction," October 12, 1983, 4.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Mark Trahant Interview.

American Journalists Association and mainstream news organizations like the Arizona Press Club.<sup>107</sup> The *Times* had become a model of excellence for all other tribal publications to follow.

### **Stop the Presses**

Nevertheless, when Peter MacDonald regained the chairmanship in the narrow and polarizing 1986 tribal election, it was only a matter of time before the *Navajo Times* would be shut down. After weighing Chairman Zah and MacDonald's positions on the issues, carefully reviewing each of their past service, and allowing each an equal chance to voice their opinions and platforms in the paper, the *Times* had endorsed Zah.<sup>108</sup> And unlike his opponent, Peter MacDonald did not tolerate criticism from the tribal newspaper. The *Times* was still in a vulnerable position because it had not yet become fully independent and the tribe still covered its sizable operating losses. MacDonald used this debt as an excuse to shut down the paper after reading one too many critical articles and editorials.

Just over a month into MacDonald's new term, he ordered that the *Navajo Times* be closed. The tribal police marched on the *Times* office, forced everyone on the staff to leave and never return.<sup>109</sup> The tribe forced the *Times* to lay off nearly all of the staff, including all writers and editors.<sup>110</sup> When the *Navajo Times* appeared on newsstands again a few months later, it was an entirely different product. Regressing to its origins, the *Times* under the new MacDonald administration reverted back to putting out a weekly

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<sup>107</sup> Sarah Helm, "Death of a Daily Newspaper: Deficits or Tribal Politics?"

<sup>108</sup> Mark Trahan Interview.

<sup>109</sup> Sarah Helm, "Death of a Daily Newspaper: Deficits or Tribal Politics?"

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

round up of tribal government press statements, advertisements, and announcements.<sup>111</sup>

The tribal council hired Joe Shields—a retired Texan journalism lecturer—to write copy.<sup>112</sup> The only bylines in the paper were for Shields.<sup>113</sup> All of the Navajo talent that had been brought on staff was gone. All critical coverage of tribal affairs disappeared. MacDonald had rendered the tribal newspaper incapable of covering the news for its people. He had suppressed press freedom. But the spirit of independence and skepticism that Trahan and Tapahe had instilled in the young Navajo journalists on their staff would soon lead to a reassertion of the power of the press.

### **The Rebirth of the *Navajo Times***

The shutdown of the *Times* as a free journalistic force was short-lived. Trahan and Tapahe's efforts to train a large cohort of young Navajo men and women to become critical journalists who believed in the value of a free press were too successful for the paper's new fervor to die out for good. The young Navajo journalists who had been trained as interns and entry-level writers under Trahan and Tapahe would continue trying to hold the Navajo government accountable through positions at independent newspapers in towns bordering the reservation and find a way to work their way back into control of their tribe's newspaper.

Peter MacDonald's final term as chairman ended in tumult thanks to the investigative reporting of a former *Times* writer, Betty Reid. Reid had been one of the

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<sup>111</sup> Sarah Helm, "Death of a Daily Newspaper: Deficits or Tribal Politics?"

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

many young Navajo journalists trained by Trahan and Tapahe.<sup>114</sup> After graduating from journalism school at the University of Colorado, the *Times* hired Reid in 1985.<sup>115</sup> She immediately began reporting on the tribal government affairs, amassing important contacts and sources in Window Rock. Reid lost her job just like the rest of Trahan's staff when MacDonald ordered the shutdown of the *Times*. But she quickly found work at the nearby *Gallup Independent*—an independent paper for the reservation border town of Gallup, New Mexico.<sup>116</sup> It was at the *Independent* where Reid received the tip that would bring MacDonald down.

In July 1987, just months after MacDonald padlocked the doors of the *Navajo Times* headquarters, a confidential source slipped a two-page, typewritten memo to Reid. The memo contained information about the Navajo Nation's purchase of the 491,000 acre Big Boquillas ranch west of Flagstaff, Arizona.<sup>117</sup> MacDonald had ordered the tribe to purchase the land for \$33.4 million a few weeks earlier. The memo showed that only five minutes before the tribe paid that sum, somebody else had purchased the ranch for only \$26.2 million. A difference of \$7.2 million in a mere five minutes. Reid published a story in the *Independent* on the ranch purchase that initially received little attention. But the story spurred further investigations, from reporters and from tribal and federal officials. Over the next few months, details surfaced that Byron "Bud" Brown and Tom Tracy, close friends of MacDonald's, were the original buyers. They had prearranged with MacDonald the "flipping" of the ranch property to the Navajos for a seven million profit.

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<sup>114</sup> Sandy Tolan, "Showdown at Window Rock," *New York Times Magazine*, November 26, 1989, accessed March 8, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/11/26/magazine/showdown-at-window-rock.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Tolan, "Showdown at Window Rock."

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

They had offered MacDonald between 500,000 and 750,000 dollars in bribery for his complicity in the act.<sup>118</sup> The “Bo-Gate” scandal would turn out to be only the tip of the iceberg.

Throughout 1988, tribal and federal investigators began to thoroughly examine MacDonald’s dealings with contractors who did business with the tribe. A Senate investigation into fraud in Indian Country initially aimed at the Bureau of Indian Affairs refocused its sights on MacDonald after the news of “Bo-Gate” struck. In February 1989, MacDonald was called to Washington to testify in front of Congress. At his hearings, many contractors came forward detailing extensive cash and gifts they had given the chairman in order to do business on the reservation: free limousine service, trips to Hawaii and Las Vegas, and stacks upon stacks of 100 dollar bills. MacDonald denied the accusations and continued to deceive the Navajo people, but the evidence was too strong against him.<sup>119</sup>

The Tribal Council forced MacDonald to step down ten days after the Congressional hearing. He refused to leave. For months, he and his supporters clung to power not acknowledging the Council’s authority to remove him from office. But eventually, in May, the council ordered tribal police to forcibly remove MacDonald and his followers from the chairman’s Window Rock offices. The first effort at removal went peacefully. But two months later, a gang of MacDonald supporters marched on the Window Rock offices, armed with baseball bats and two-by-twos. When tribal police attempted to break up the crowd, violence erupted, and officers under attack from the protesters opened fire. During the riot, two men died of gunshot wounds and many more

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<sup>118</sup> Tolan, “Showdown at Window Rock.”

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

were injured.<sup>120</sup> MacDonald was soon arrested and charged with numerous counts of bribery, instigating a riot, fraud, racketeering, ethics violations, extortion, and conspiracy.<sup>121</sup> Both tribal and federal courts found him guilty in multiple trials and sentenced him to 14 years in a federal penitentiary.<sup>122</sup>

The Navajo Nation Government immediately took steps to reorganize its structure to cede power from the executive branch and add more checks to keep the government accountable. The new measures disbanded the chairmanship, replacing it with a less powerful president position, and gave the legislative branch of the council more oversight powers.<sup>123</sup>

A part of this effort meant once again allowing the *Times* to challenge the tribal government rather than act as its mouthpiece. The tribal government recognized that Reid's exposé of MacDonald's transgressions was only possible in a newspaper with editorial independence and a free press. Tribal leaders knew that the official paper of the tribe needed to be able to act in the same way to properly serve the Navajo people as an ombudsman. Former staff writers from the Trahant era were brought in to lead the newspaper, replacing the "Anglo yes men" who MacDonald had put in charge.<sup>124</sup> By 1992, Tom Arviso, Jr., a former intern and reporter under Trahant, had gained control over editorial decisions at the *Times*.<sup>125</sup>

Arviso's first true test of his paper's journalistic freedom came in December 1995 in the form of an anonymous note alleging misdeeds by Navajo President Albert

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<sup>120</sup> Tolan, "Showdown at Window Rock."

<sup>121</sup> Wilkins, *The Navajo Political Experience*, 93.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, 94.

<sup>124</sup> John Johnson, "A Navajo Newspaper Tests the Boundaries," *Los Angeles Times*, October 19, 1997, accessed March 10, 2013, <http://articles.latimes.com/1997/oct/19/news/mn-44462>.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

Hale's wife. The writer of the note, who signed anonymously as "Navajo voter and concerned educator," claimed to have seen Regina Hale beating her 14 year old child outside the presidential residence.<sup>126</sup> When Arviso and investigative reporter Marley Shebala looked into the matter, they found that Mrs. Hale had in fact slapped her child, but they also found much more. Surprisingly, Mrs. Hale wanted to talk to the newspaper to reveal the problems of her broken marriage, to accuse him of cheating on her with his press secretary, and misusing tribal funds to pay for their trips.

When the facts checked out on the explosive story, Arviso knew he would be risking his and his staff's jobs if he printed it. President Hale told him not to print it, but he did not deny the story's veracity. On January 18, 1996, the *Navajo Times* published the story on the front page with the headline "Image Is Not Everything." The story caught the entire reservation's attention and obviously put President Hale in a difficult position. Arviso's courage in publishing the story against the strong pressure from the tribal government earned him a Wassaja Award for courage and service, the highest honor awarded by NAJA. The story led to increased accountability and transparency as President Hale was forced to take a leave of absence and pay back 20,000 dollars to the tribe for travel expenses.<sup>127</sup> Yet based on past experience, many in the *Times* office braced for possible firings.<sup>128</sup>

But nothing happened. Despite wielded the legal authority to dismantle the paper, President Hale did not fire anybody on the *Times* staff.<sup>129</sup> When he ran for the presidency in 1994, Hale had promised not to interfere with the operations of the *Times*, recalling

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<sup>126</sup> Johnson, "A Navajo Newspaper Pushes the Boundaries."

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

clearly that the shutdown of the paper had been the first step in MacDonald's downfall.<sup>130</sup> Hale allowed the newspaper to keep publishing negative reports about his personal life and critical reviews of his administration's actions. He criticized the *Times*' coverage plenty and hired a strong-willed press officer to protect himself from future scandals, but he allowed the presses to keep rolling.<sup>131</sup> He even helped move the newspaper on the path toward financial independence from the tribal government. Under his administration, the Tribal Council voted to privatize the *Navajo Times*.<sup>132</sup> It took some years to make independence viable, but Arviso worked with the tribal government to step-by-step replace tribal subsidies with advertising revenues.<sup>133</sup> In 2004, the *Navajo Times* incorporated as a private company and finally became completely independent from the Navajo Nation government.<sup>134</sup> It was finally able to be an independent ombudsman for the Navajo people.

The current masthead of the *Navajo Times* reads "Newspaper of the Navajo People."<sup>135</sup> The paper now regularly launches investigations on the tribal government's activities and freely criticizes those in power.<sup>136</sup> The *Navajo Times* continues to fight for freedom of the press in Indian Country and to attempt to speak out for the interests of all Navajo people. The paper is no longer on the side of those in power. The *Navajo Times* strives to be a newspaper for all of the people in the tribal nation it represents. In doing so, the newspaper is a shining example of a free and open local press institution in a reservation community.

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<sup>130</sup> Johnson, "A Navajo Newspaper Pushes the Boundaries."

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Arviso, Jr., "The Navajo Times."

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> "Masthead," *Navajo Times*, December 27, 2012, 1.

<sup>136</sup> Arviso, Jr., "The Navajo Times."



### Chapter Three

#### Red Power Journalism



*“From the reoccupation of Alcatraz in 1969 to Wounded Knee in 1973 and far beyond, Akwesasne Notes was the voice of a movement. It never compromised or shrank before controversy. It was the unwavering voice of Native people and too often their only advocate.”*<sup>1</sup>

—Doug George-Kanentiio, Editor of *Akwesasne Notes* (1996)

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<sup>1</sup> Doug George-Kanentiio, “Akwesasne Notes: How the Mohawk Nation Created a Newspaper and Shaped Contemporary Native America,” in *Voices from the Underground: Insider Histories of the Vietnam Era Underground Press, Part 1*, ed. Ken Wachsberger (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011), 137.

“B.I.A. I’m Not Your Indian Anymore.” This confrontational and defiant message adorned the cover of the *Akwesasne Notes* book covering the Trail of Broken Treaties (Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> The following 92 pages compiled the newspaper’s detailed coverage of the 1972 tense occupation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs headquarters in Washington, D.C by reservation Indian protestors and Red Power activists.<sup>3</sup> *Notes* was the only media outlet allowed in the building by the occupiers because *Notes* was the only news source they knew they could trust.<sup>4</sup> They knew *Notes* was the only media source that empathized with them and understood their desperate frustration with the terrible state of Indian affairs in North America.<sup>5</sup>



Fig. 1: Cover of *B.I.A. I'm Not Your Indian Any More*<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *Trail of Broken Treaties: B.I.A I'm Not Your Indian Any More*, (Roosevelt, NY: Akwesasne Notes, 1974), i.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> George-Kanentiio, 127.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Trail of Broken Treaties: B.I.A I'm Not Your Indian Any More.*

Over the previous three years, *Akwesasne Notes*, a reservation paper based in the Akwesasne Mohawk Nation in upstate New York and Ontario, Canada, had grown from a scrappy community newsletter into a powerful grassroots media empire with a distribution network and readership that spanned the entire North American continent. It had established itself firmly as the voice of the nation-wide Red Power protest movement. Its roughly hewn pages amplified the voices of dissidents and protestors who were angry at the way the federal government was violating treaties with tribes and mistreating indigenous peoples.

In 1971, historian Alvin Josephy, Jr. summarized the aim of Red Power as the reestablishment of “the right of Indians to be free of colonialist rule and to run their own affairs, with security for their lands and rights.”<sup>7</sup> The young leaders of the Red Power movement found a way to tap into widespread frustration across Indian Country with the federal government’s treatment of tribal nations.<sup>8</sup> Red Power activists blamed the power structure of the federal bureaucracy and corrupt tribal government officials for the gripping poverty and lack of opportunity that consumed most tribal communities.<sup>9</sup> They distrusted those Indians who they thought were assimilating or collaborating with White society and promoted distinctive indigenous political and cultural identity and utopian visions of separate and autonomous tribal nations that would stand defiantly against Western colonizers.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Alvin Josephy, Jr., *Red Power: The American Indians’ Fight for Freedom*, (New York: American Heritage Press, 1971), 19.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

During the 1960s, radical organizations began to rise up all over Indian Country. These “Red Power” groups—such as the National Indian Youth Council, the Indians of All Tribes, and the American Indian Movement—learned from other radical separatist social movements of the 1960s like the Black Panthers and La Raza.<sup>11</sup> The concept of separatism held a special appeal to Indians, who held a strong historical memory of cultural and political independence from the United States. Through dramatic demonstrations and protests—the year and a half long occupation of Alcatraz, the Trail of Broken Treaties march on Washington ending in an occupation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs building, and the reoccupation of Wounded Knee, among many others—these activists drew national attention to Native issues and forced the federal government to address their concerns.<sup>12</sup> The theatrics of charismatic Red Power leaders drew an enthusiastic and energized following from supporters but also harsh criticism from more moderate Indian leaders and advocacy organizations.<sup>13</sup>

Red Power was part of the larger context of 1960s and 1970s Indian self-determination and tribal sovereignty politics that arose in response to federal policies aimed at eliminating tribes and assimilating Indians into mainstream society. One national-scope publication became the eyes, ears, and voices of the rebellious and uncompromising Red Power movement: *Akwesasne Notes*. *Notes* tried to create a Red Power network and speak for activists across Indian Country. Because they were part of the movement, young *Notes* staff got unrivaled access to the scenes of the movement’s important historical events. The paper promoted complete tribal sovereignty and a revival

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<sup>11</sup> Alvin M. Josephy, Joane Nagel, and Troy Johnson, ed., *Red Power: The American Indians’ Fight for Freedom, Second Edition*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 2.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

of traditional indigenous cultures and identities.<sup>14</sup> *Akwesasne Notes* evolved organically and by accident from a small, amateur reservation paper into a national militant activist newspaper with a large readership and impact. *Notes* embodied the Red Power movement, both the powerful, confrontational tactics and the overly radical and idealistic values that made the movement unable to accept modest successes.

### **Akwesasne**

Akwesasne was the perfect place for an international indigenous newspaper to begin. The Mohawks of Akwesasne possessed great knowledge of reservation life and urban Indian issues. Many of these Mohawks were primed to play major roles in the militant activism that asserted treaty rights and indigenous sovereignty. The land base of the Mohawk nation, one of the Six Nations of the Haudenosaunee or Iroquois, straddles the border between the United States and Canada—and is composed of the St. Regis Indian Reservation in upstate New York, Cornwall Island in Ontario, and Saint Régis in Québec.<sup>15</sup> During the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Akwesasne Mohawks had seen unenlightened Indian policies from both the American and Canadian governments.<sup>16</sup> The Iroquois had signed many treaties with both countries guaranteeing rights to their land and political sovereignty. During the first two centuries under the colonizing rule of the United States and Canada, the Six Nations worked to retain their distinct cultural identities and political autonomy. Yet federal, state, and provincial governments would continue to chip away at treaty rights and limit the rights of tribal citizens.

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<sup>14</sup> Laurence M. Hauptman, *The Iroquois Struggle for Survival: World War II to Red Power*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 80.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, x.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, ix.

In the post-World War II era, Mohawks from Akwesasne struggled with the devastating effects of American and Canadian termination policies, pollution of the nation's natural resources, and the loss of traditional culture.<sup>17</sup> Many Mohawk men had served in the American and Canadian armed forces during the war. War industries had attracted Mohawk women to industrial cities like Syracuse and Buffalo.<sup>18</sup> After the war, formal education replaced traditional teachings on the reservation, and Mohawks became more acculturated to mainstream society. Many Mohawk families uprooted from the reservation and moved to urban environments across the United States and Canada for work in manufacturing, construction and ironworking.<sup>19</sup> As far away as they went, however, these Mohawks retained lines of communication with the reservation; they kept close ties with their ancestral homeland.

During the 1950s and 1960s, those living within the Akwesasne Nation faced external pressures and internal struggles. "Elected" tribal councils and governments propped up by the Canadian, American, and state governments claimed power over the reservations even though most Iroquois people still followed the "traditional" Longhouse leadership of the Mohawk Council of Chiefs.<sup>20</sup> The official St. Regis Tribal Council worked within the systems of the federal government, fighting for the tribe through litigation in federal courts and advocacy for state and federally funded programs. The Council also compromised with federal and state officials on treaty rights in allowing large infrastructure projects to dam up the St. Lawrence and St. Regis waterways and

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<sup>17</sup> George-Kanentiio, 123.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

pollute many local natural resources.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, the traditional leaders began to challenge the current state of affairs and press for the creation of a separate nation-state based on aboriginal principles. Those who followed these traditional leaders would become part of the defiant, militant Red Power movement. The Longhouse leadership helped found *Akwesasne Notes* in 1968. *Notes* was initially meant to serve as a community newsletter that would unite Mohawks behind the traditional leaders' vision of a unified, sovereign Akwesansne nation-state, independent and distinct from the political and societal power structures of the United States and Canada.

### **The Beginning of *Notes***

Although *Akwesasne Notes* became national in scope, its beginnings were motivated by a very local concern. For decades, the United States and Canada had made the crossing of their national border difficult for tribal citizens.<sup>22</sup> The centuries old Jay Treaty signed by the tribe and both countries in 1794 allowed for free travel within Akwesasne.<sup>23</sup> But in practice, American and Canadian governments split up Akwesasne into separate reservations and forced tribal citizens to carry passports and other documentation to cross the national border.<sup>24</sup> In late 1968, a small group of young Mohawks, heavily influenced by the civil rights movement and local leaders, challenged the border restrictions, staging a blockade of the Seaway International Bridge.<sup>25</sup> The Mohawk activists knew the power of the media. They invited a Canadian film crew to

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<sup>21</sup> Hauptman, 152.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 134.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 146.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

take footage. They also distributed a newsletter with articles literally cut and pasted onto paper from various news outlets about their efforts, the first issue of *Akwesasne Notes*.<sup>26</sup>

The original idea for *Notes* came from John Fadden, a Mohawk artist, and Jerry Gambill, a former Canadian Indian Affairs official who became a community organizer in Akwesasne, and Ernest Benedict, a prominent young Longhouse leader and activist.<sup>27</sup> Fadden's father Ray had worked on the reservation as a middle school teacher since the 1930s.<sup>28</sup> He shaped his curriculum to encourage his students to take pride in their Native heritage. With his Akwesasne Mohawk Counsellor Organization, from the 1930s through the 1950s, Fadden took his students at his own expense on field trips to other Indian reservations and historical sites as far south as the Carolinas and as far west as the Mississippi.<sup>29</sup> He also ran the Six Nations Indian Museum, and tried to increase knowledge and pride in Iroquois history and traditional culture.<sup>30</sup> His son and his classmates, including Ernest Benedict, grew up knowing their tribe's history and feeling intense pride in being Indians. They became the tribal leaders who would lead Iroquois Red Power protests and activism in the 1960s and 1970s.

Jerry Gambill had come to Akwesasne during the mid-1960s as a community development worker. He had been influenced by utopian literature and Gambill won the sympathy of the tribe by learning Mohawk language, history, and mores.<sup>31</sup> After he lost his official job with the Canadian Department of Indian Affairs in 1967, Gambill was allowed to stay at Cornwall Island and was adopted into the tribe under the name

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<sup>26</sup> George-Kanentiio, 126.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 122.

<sup>28</sup> Hauptman, 204.

<sup>29</sup> George-Kanentiio, 122.

<sup>30</sup> Hauptman, 206.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 222.



Rarihokwats, meaning “He writes.”<sup>32</sup> Along with Ernest Benedict, Gambill founded and helped run multiple organizations aimed at promoting community development and education. Gambill and Benedict revived Fadden’s Akwesasne Mohawk Counsellor Organization to educate the reservation’s youth.<sup>33</sup> The men also started White Roots of Peace, a travelling caravan that toured reservations, college campuses and urban community centers across the continent performing traditional music, telling stories, and selling indigenous art, crafts, books, and poetry.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps most importantly, the men, with the approval of the Longhouse, created *Akwesasne Notes*, which Gambill agreed to edit.



Fig. 2: The first issue of *Akwesasne Notes*<sup>35</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Hauptman, 224.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 223.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> “Early Issue,” *Akwesasne Notes*, March 1969.

The first issues of *Notes* were far from masterpieces of journalism. With a miniscule operating budget and without the means to even purchase a typewriter, Gambill produced and paid for the issues almost entirely by himself.<sup>36</sup> Aside from a few handwritten notes, the paper consisted entirely of cut and pasted articles from other news outlets, both tribal publications and mainstream news services (Figure 2).<sup>37</sup> In the first issue, all of the articles focused on the International Bridge Blockade, U.S.-Canadian border restrictions, and other issues relevant to local concerns.<sup>38</sup>

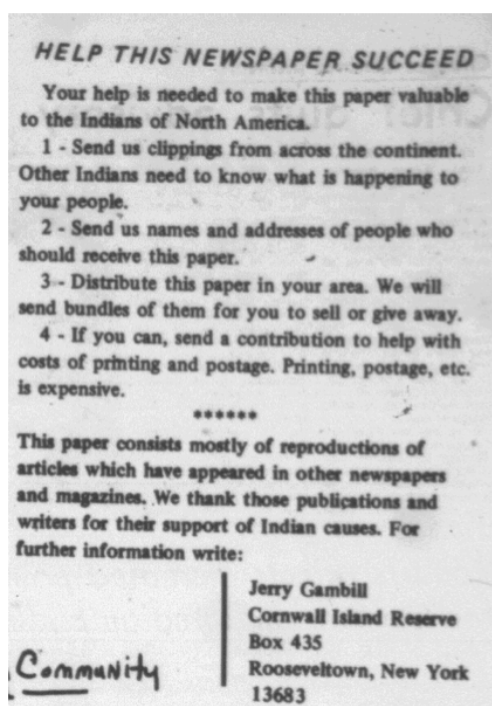


Fig. 2: A call for contributions in an early issue of *Notes*<sup>39</sup>

Pretty quickly, however, *Notes* began reaching out to other tribal communities, readers, and publications across the continent for content. Coverage of issues and events

<sup>36</sup> "We Never Intended to Start a Newspaper: A History of *Akwesasne Notes*," *Akwesasne Notes*, Early Summer 1976, 6.

<sup>37</sup> "Early Issue."

<sup>38</sup> "First Issue," *Akwesasne Notes*, February 1969.

<sup>39</sup> "Help This Newspaper Succeed," *Akwesasne Notes*, May 1969, 2.

across Indian Country began to appear in *Notes*. Some pieces came from major news outlets like the *New York Times* and *Time* showing that mainstream Americans were paying attention to American Indian affairs. The decision to include accounts from the mainstream media also showed that the Red Power activists who made up much of *Notes*' readership cared about how the press was portraying their movement. *Notes* also became a digest of contemporary tribal media from publications as far away as the *Tundra Times*, which covered Alaska Natives, and *El Grito*, a Chicano and Native American paper in northern New Mexico.<sup>40</sup> Letters to the editor came in from all over Canada and the United States and became a center of communications between Red Power activists separated by thousands of miles.<sup>41</sup> Despite its amateur nature and lack of much original content, *Akwesasne Notes* created a devoted grassroots network of readers and contributors that would serve it well when Red Power truly emerged onto the national scene. It created the communications infrastructure that would allow Red Power leaders to communicate ideas internally and broadcast their views to the outside world.

Despite its widespread network, the paper was operating under considerable structural constraints. The Longhouse was unable to devote much money to support the newspaper. For the first couple years, the paper had no printing press. It had no typesetting. And it had no budget to pay any of its staff.<sup>42</sup> Volunteers from the reservation worked tirelessly assembling issues, labeling mailing addresses, and bundling packages.<sup>43</sup> The expensive costs of printing and mailing out issues constantly put *Notes* in the red.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>“Early Issues,” *Akwesasne Notes*, 1969.

<sup>41</sup> Hauptman, 224.

<sup>42</sup> “We Never Intended to Start a Newspaper,” 6.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

*Notes* received much-needed help from Wesleyan University's Indian Studies Program and University of California Davis Native American studies professor Jack Forbes, who at various times sponsored *Notes* to help the paper receive second class mailing rates. *Notes* tried to recruit donors from its base of grassroots supporters, but few of them had money to spare. A scattering of donations given directly to the newspaper from eager readers and the profits of sales by the White Roots of Peace brought in enough money to keep the publication barely afloat. *Notes* also became the target of government intimidation. The FBI's COINTEL program and the CIA's Operation Chaos, which both attempted to harass and undermine many late-1960s and 1970s subversive organizations, targeted *Notes*.<sup>45</sup> And Gambill faced multiple arrests and deportation hearings, which he and *Notes* staff believed were due to his controversial political position as the editor of *Notes*.<sup>46</sup> Even against all of this, readership steadily increased from the original tens of copies to a couple thousand by the time Indian activists landed on Alcatraz.

### **Alcatraz**

When major Red Power demonstrations erupted, *Akwesasne Notes* took advantage of its newly created grassroots network and readership to gain unparalleled access to the stories. Almost by accident, the paper was in the perfect position to become the voice of a giant protest movement. It helped that, by coincidence, some Akwesasne Mohawk men were in important positions at the time. President Nixon's first appointed Commissioner of Indian Affairs Louis Bruce was a Mohawk from the St. Regis Reservation.<sup>47</sup> More

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<sup>45</sup> Murphy and Murphy, 87.

<sup>46</sup> George-Kanentiio, 134.

<sup>47</sup> Cleve Mathews "St. Regis Mohawk Named to BIA," *Akwesasne Notes*, July 1969, 1.

importantly for establishing connection and credibility with activists, Richard Oakes, the leader of the Alcatraz occupation was an Akwesasne Mohawk who knew of *Notes*.<sup>48</sup>

Historians credit the events at Alcatraz with finally bringing the decades-old Indian rights movement to the forefront of public attention.<sup>49</sup> From late 1969 through 1971, citing a clause in the 1868 Ft. Laramie treaty which gave the Sioux the right to claim unused federal land, a group of young urban Indians called Bay Area Natives staked a claim to the island of Alcatraz—which had been vacant since the 1963 closure of the federal prison.<sup>50</sup> Richard Oakes, the spokesman for the occupiers, was a Mohawk who had grown up at Akwesasne. Oakes moved out to San Francisco in the mid-1960s to find a job in ironworking.<sup>51</sup> In 1969, Oakes attended a presentation by White Roots of Peace at San Francisco State that encouraged young urban Indians to get involved in Native politics.<sup>52</sup> The charismatic and photogenic young man was so moved that he decided to help lead the proposed occupation of Alcatraz. On November 20, 1969, after a couple failed attempts to get to Alcatraz, Oakes led a small group onto a Canadian schooner that took them close to the island.<sup>53</sup> Before the boat could land, Oakes took off jumped out of the boat into the chilly water and swam toward the shore. In mainstream media accounts of Alcatraz, he would become the symbol of Native resistance.<sup>54</sup>

The coverage of the Alcatraz occupation in *Akwesasne Notes* followed some of the patterns of other early issues. *Notes* compiled many mainstream and tribal media

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<sup>48</sup> George-Kanentiio, 128.

<sup>49</sup> Vine Deloria, Jr., *Behind the Trail of Broken Treaties: An Indian Declaration of Independence*, (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1974), 39.

<sup>50</sup> Deloria, 39.

<sup>51</sup> George-Kanentiio, 127.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 128.

<sup>53</sup> Deloria, 39.

<sup>54</sup> Earl Caldwell, “Alcatraz: Taken Back,” *New York Times*, December 10, 1969, 1.

accounts of the occupation. But the paper interspersed inspirational quotations, political cartoons, poetry and artwork among the articles. These were all clearly original contributions from *Notes* staff based on their typewritten fonts.<sup>55</sup> On the front cover of the first issue covering Alcatraz, *Notes* ran a quotation, “Silent too damn long.”<sup>56</sup> Going forward, *Notes* would try to contribute more of its own coverage to its issues. Native activists knew that *Notes* was on their side, in part because of the association between Oakes and *Notes*. Red Power activists decided to allow representatives of *Notes* into their operations to witness and report on their activities. So when the next major protest events occurred, *Notes* would be immersed in them gathering first hand accounts.



Fig. 3: Coverage of the Alcatraz occupation in *Akwesasne Notes*<sup>57</sup>

<sup>55</sup> “Alcatraz Issue,” *Akwesasne Notes*, November 1969.

<sup>56</sup> “Silent too damn long,” *Akwesasne Notes*, November 1969, 1.

<sup>57</sup> “Alcatraz Issue,” *Akwesasne Notes*, November 1969, 1-2.

Throughout 1970 and 1971, *Notes* grew in both its content and its reach. The paper ran coverage of the continuing occupation of Alcatraz and other events like the fish-in protests in Puyallup, Washington, President Nixon's address on Indian Affairs, and the federal government's return of 70,000 acres of sacred land to Taos Pueblo.<sup>58</sup> *Notes* published multiple reviews of important books like Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* and Vine Deloria, Jr.'s *Custer Died for Your Sins*.<sup>59</sup> In 1971, *Notes* had finally gathered enough funding to purchase a typesetter, allowing for more original content and a much more professional looking layout.<sup>60</sup> Thanks to the network that *Notes* had established across Indian Country, reporters and activists began to contribute content to the publication. *Notes* could not afford to pay any writers, but that did not stop them from devoting themselves to the movement's cause.<sup>61</sup> The paper began to run sections on various parts of Indian Country and on Indian Affairs action in Washington, DC and Ottawa.<sup>62</sup> It also began featuring calendars of upcoming events and directories of activists and Indian rights organizations.<sup>63</sup> Hundreds of letters to the editor poured in from across the continent proving the success of *Notes'* grassroots delivery.<sup>64</sup> Readership had grown to almost 40,000 by the summer of 1972.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> "1970-71 Issues," *Akwesasne Notes*, 1970-71.

<sup>59</sup> Talis Bergmanis, "Custer is a Tomahawk of a Book," *Akwesasne Notes*, November 1969, 12.

<sup>60</sup> "We Never Intended to Start a Newspaper," 6.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> "What's Going on in Washington?," *Akwesasne Notes*, June 1971, 4.

<sup>63</sup> "Calendar and List of Urban and Action Centers," *Akwesasne Notes*, June 1971, 2 & 28.

<sup>64</sup> "Letters," *Akwesasne Notes*, June 1971, 26-27.

<sup>65</sup> "Circulation," *Akwesasne Notes*, June 1972, 1.

## **The Trail of Broken Treaties**

*Notes* used its momentum to provide unrivaled in-person coverage of the two major Red Power demonstrations that followed Alcatraz: the Trail of Broken Treaties—a march on Washington from many reservations across Indian Country that ended in a weeklong occupation of the BIA Headquarters—and Wounded Knee II—a seventy day long forceful occupation of a small town on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota by the militant American Indian Movement.<sup>66</sup> For both of these events, *Notes* produced special issues devoted solely to in-depth coverage of the context and main issues behind them. These issues took a extra time and effort to produce.<sup>67</sup> The issues and later books produced by *Notes* became the authoritative accounts of the demonstrations from the perspective of the participants.<sup>68</sup> According to *Notes* staff writer and in later years editor-in-chief Doug George-Kanentiio, *Notes* had:

an advantage over all other publications, since its writers had direct access to the events. No other journalists were permitted to enter the BIA headquarters or to live among the fighters at Wounded Knee. The photographs from that time show people who are at ease in front of the camer because they trusted the persons taking the pictures. They trusted *Notes*.<sup>69</sup>

The Trail of Broken Treaties issue showed a deep level of understanding and empathy with the protestors. The 1972 murder of Richard Oakes during a dispute with a YMCA camp manager who had a reputation of being rough with Indian kids inspired the demonstration inspired Red Power activists to plan a national demonstration for Indian rights.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Deloria, 55.

<sup>67</sup> “We Never Intended to Start a Newspaper,” 7.

<sup>68</sup> Murphy and Murphy, 86.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 127.

<sup>70</sup> George-Kanentiio, 129.



## He liked his Mohawk name, Ranoies—'A Big Man'

(For those who work on AKWESASNE NOTES and who meet with WHITE ROOTS OF PEACE, Richard Oakes was a well-known brother. Ranoies, editor of NOTES, was being held in jail as part of the campaign to free the newspaper and the traditional people of Akwesasne, when he heard of Richard's death. He writes here about him.)

Richard Oakes was one of the first people to help us get started. When the group known as White Roots of Peace made its first trip, we stayed in San Francisco in our apartment home to stay for two weeks with Richard's family and his friends crowded into student housing on the San Francisco State College campus.

There were twelve of us that he made at home. We slept on his living room floor, typed up part of an issue of NOTES on his typewriter, and accompanied him about the Bay area while he and his colleagues were planning the invasion and occupation of Alcatraz. It was September, 1969, and we were still on our way back to Akwesasne when we heard the news on the radio that the Indians had occupied the island.

Richard was a strong, good humored man, always kidding and laughing and cajoling people into committing themselves deeper in their cause. He was the sort of natural-born leader kind, although he himself searched for guidance and direction - he had just become aware of his Indian heritage in a political way as a young adult.

Then the death of Yvonne. Richard left Alcatraz. Later, he phoned us to say there was big action at Pitt River. The next news was that he was unconscious and near death as a result of an unprovoked and savage beating when Indian medicine made him strong enough to talk, he phoned again, many times. At first, his voice was almost incoherent, but as he gradually recovered his speech, we could understand what he said, but following his thoughts was difficult.

We had hoped that we could return the hospitality and warmth which he had shown us in the event that he could return to Akwesasne. Suddenly, he appeared with his family, just as we were leaving on a White Roots tour in New England. He came along, although he was far from well, and Anne, his wife,



bravely managed to care for the family in our crowded vehicle. Richard had a strong craving for ice cream, and our tiny refrigerator worked overtime keeping him in supply.

He had hoped that he would be able to get the necessary medical care and therapy in nearby Montreal. He was recognized by the Canadian Government as an Indian, and was entitled to medical care. But when the government failed to come through and the only available housing on the reservation was inadequate, the family returned to Anne's home just off the ocean in the beautiful and isolated Kashi Reservation in California.

One more year later he returned - again unexpectedly - with his growing family. He was better now, but still a shadow of his former self. His injuries had taken a terrible toll. He was impatient - his mind was still turning out a thousand ideas an hour, but his physical ability and his capacity to follow through were impaired. He was still a leader - but this time he could not, tragically, keep up with his following.

He chafed. He wanted a foster parent project where Indian parents would look after homeless Indian children. That would be a good old age home, too, he said, so that the generations would not be separated. He wanted to re-establish herds of deer, buffalo, elk, so that the native people could develop an independent economy. What about establishing a trading confederation across the continent, so that Pacific salmon could be traded for Tropeus oen and Navajo wool for Lakota cattle? He had been impressed with our travels together, and with Emre Benedict's plans for the North American Indian Travelling College - why not a mobile college for native students who would take a year from their studies to travel about this land. And with a mobile medical clinic too. He was strong for native sovereignty and culture - one time he drove through the Canadian Customs post on Cornwall Island without stopping. He knew what his rights were.

There were not enough hands for all that his mind could produce, and when the winter snows came, so did a feeling of depression. He went from bar to bar on the land skirting the Mohawk reservation here, not drinking, but trying to get everyone to forget the booze and get going on all that needed to be done, but many of his old friends were still on the same road that he had left many years back and they did not listen to him.

And so, following a map and a list of friends across the continent that we drew up for him, he and Anne and the kids piled into a battered station wagon to head for California once more. They only got a few miles before they had to turn back for repairs, but they started out again a day or so later.

That was the last we saw of Richard. But he would show up often. "This is Ranoies. Shennakowa ken? When are you going to meet me a tape so I can learn my own language?" was his usual greeting. He liked his Mohawk name, Ranoies. "A Big Man."

And with each call, the seemingly impossible ideas, the challenges. "How about that foster-home idea I was talking about?" he would ask. "I'm working on a book." "What about getting a bunch of Indian college students and traveling through Mexico for college credit?" he wondered. As for his own life, he was still hampered and bothered by his injuries. Employment was hard to come by. So was medical care, even welfare.

And then the news of his death. Shot down. Richard Oakes. Ranoies. 31 years old. Shot down. The kids - Rocky, Tanya, Leonard, Little Pawn, the others.

Somewhere, all those ideas don't seem quite so impossible now. Maybe someone will see that there are enough Indian homes for Indian kids - and with their grandparents, too. Maybe nations will start to develop a natural economy in cooperation with each other. Maybe that traveling college idea will materialize.

Ranoies would like that. That, like Alcatraz, was his legacy.



Fig. 4: *Notes* obituary for Richard Oakes with Alcatraz pictured at the bottom of the page<sup>71</sup>

In memory of Oakes—who had continued his activism for Indian rights after departing from Alcatraz—the Bay Area Natives, along with other budding Red Power groups including the American Indian Movement, planned a protest caravan across reservations in the United States that would deliver a summation of Indian concerns to the federal government in Washington.<sup>72</sup> *Notes* wrote a full length memorial of Oakes right before the caravan began that praised him as the symbol of Red Power and called for other activists to live up to his legacy.<sup>73</sup>

The caravan took with it a set of demands called the "Twenty Points Proposal," which detailed twenty areas that the federal government needed to address to reestablish

<sup>71</sup> "He liked his Mohawk name, Ranoies—'A Big Man.'" *Akwesasne Notes*, October 1972, 5.

<sup>72</sup> Deloria, 48.

<sup>73</sup> "He liked his Mohawk name, Ranoies—'A Big Man.'"

honest treaty-based relationships with tribes.<sup>74</sup> Political scientist Vine Deloria, Jr. said the Twenty Points showed “a fairly sophisticated understanding of the type of relationship with the federal government that could be best defined as a quasi-protectorate status”—what President Nixon had promised in his new Indian policy proposals—and were “extremely accurate in their assessment of the feelings of Indians across the nation.”<sup>75</sup> When the thousand or so protestors arrived in Washington in October 1972, just a week before the presidential election, they found no place to stay and no members of the Nixon administration willing to hear their concerns.<sup>76</sup> The government offered to allow the protestors to stay in the Bureau of Indian Affairs building on the day they arrived.<sup>77</sup> But before they could find another place to stay, federal guards began to push younger protestors out the door. Fearful of getting forced into the brunt of the DC riot squad, the protestors seized the building and barricaded themselves in. There was destruction of BIA property, but it was unclear how much of the destruction was the result of unruly demonstrators and how much was the result of disorderly government officers.<sup>78</sup> The White House negotiated with the demonstrators to get them to leave peacefully and promised to consider and respond to their demands.<sup>79</sup> But the White House response, which came months later, seemed unsatisfying and hollow to many of the demonstrators.<sup>80</sup>

The difference between regular media outlets’ and *Notes*’ coverage of the Trail of Broken Treaties were stark. Brief mainstream media accounts of the Trail focused on the

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<sup>74</sup> Deloria, 48.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. 54.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 56.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 61.

destructiveness of some of the occupiers of the BIA building rather than on the substantive issues that the demonstration raised.<sup>81</sup> They also inaccurately claimed that most of the protestors were just urban Indian or even non-Indian agitators even though the organizers of the protest had a roster of participants that showed 80 percent of addresses in reservation towns.<sup>82</sup> Overall, the surface-level accounts did not do justice to the Trail of Broken Treaties as they relied to heavily on federal government and administration sources for information failed to seriously consider the merits of the protest or the protestors.



Fig. 5: Cover of special issue covering the Trail of Broken Treaties and B.I.A. Takeover<sup>83</sup>

<sup>81</sup> Deloria, 57.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> "Trail of Broken Treaties Special Issue," *Akwesasne Notes*, January 1973, 1.

*Notes'* coverage (Figure 5), on the other hand, was composed of careful detailed notes of each day on the caravan as it winded its way through reservations on the way to Washington.<sup>84</sup> Many participants were interviewed about why they were on the Trail and were featured in profiles.<sup>85</sup> Photos detailed the destruction of the BIA offices, but *Notes* reporters were able to tell that only a small minority of the protestors had gone on a destructive bender.<sup>86</sup> The FBI later revealed in declassified documents that many of the most destructive people in the BIA building were in fact government agent provocateurs acting to discredit the movement.<sup>87</sup> The *Notes* coverage carefully detailed the peaceful teach-ins and demonstrations that aimed that comprised a majority of time and efforts of the demonstrators at the BIA occupation.<sup>88</sup> The paper also ran letters and speech transcripts from government officials and editorials from mainstream newspapers to show how the protest was viewed by the outside world.<sup>89</sup> *Notes* clearly had a slant in favor of the protestors' accounts, but the fact that the paper's reports including these perspectives showed that the movement wanted to see that what they were doing was impacting the mainstream media and people in power.

### **Wounded Knee**

Not long after releasing their issue on the Trail of Broken Treaties, the *Notes* staff, along with the rest of the national media, refocused their attention on the Pine Ridge

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<sup>84</sup> "Trail of Broken Treaties Special Issue," *Akwesasne Notes*, January 1973.

<sup>85</sup> "United, We Put Our Foot on the Trail," *Akwesasne Notes*, January 1973, 4.

<sup>86</sup> "Indians Go Home," *Akwesasne Notes*, January 1973, 8.

<sup>87</sup> Deloria, 61.

<sup>88</sup> "We're Staying Here Tonight," *Akwesasne Notes*, January 1973, 6

<sup>89</sup> "The White House Promise" and "Editorials," *Akwesasne Notes*, January 1973, 11 & 23.

Reservation in South Dakota where militant American Indian Movement (AIM) activists seized and held by force the symbolic town of Wounded Knee.

The place had been the site of the 1890 Wounded Knee massacre, in which the U.S. Army killed nearly 300 Indians, mostly women and children.<sup>90</sup> The massacre had gone down in the history books as the end of the Indian Wars, and for most Americans it was where Indians disappeared from their consciousness. The Oglala Lakota, or Sioux, had long been remembered for their resistance to American forces and for their defiant and courageous warriors like Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse. But by 1973, the Oglala's Pine Ridge Reservation was the poorest place in the United States.<sup>91</sup> The reservation was under the leadership of tribal chairman Dick Wilson, a "mixed blood" who, according to AIM activists, professed a belief in assimilating Indians into mainstream American culture and cooperated fully with the federal bureaucracy.<sup>92</sup> AIM leaders accused Wilson of running the reservation like a Third World dictator and oppressed his people while appointing his followers to federal patronage jobs.<sup>93</sup> Wilson had won his chairmanship by defeating the "full-blood" Gerald One Feather who hailed from a remote, traditional community on the reservation and wanted more aboriginal sovereignty.<sup>94</sup> The followers of One Feather had called upon AIM leaders Russell Means and Dennis Banks to come help reestablish "traditional" and "distinct" indigenous political and cultural identity in Pine Ridge.<sup>95</sup> AIM obliged and took over the small reservation town of Wounded Knee,

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<sup>90</sup> *Voices from Wounded Knee, 1973: In the Words of the Participants*, (Roosevelt, NY: Akwesasne Notes, 1974), 9.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>92</sup> Deloria, 70.

<sup>93</sup> George Pierre-Castile, *To Show Heart: Native American Self-Determination and Federal Indian Policy, 1960-1975*, (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1998), 130.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> Deloria, 70.

declaring that it was an independent indigenous nation.<sup>96</sup> The militants held the town for 71 days as federal troops moved in against them and as their sympathizers and national media outlets converged on South Dakota to hear their message.<sup>97</sup> By the end, the AIM leaders were arrested and put on trial and relatively little had changed in the way of the federal government's Indian policies.<sup>98</sup>

The actions at Wounded Knee provoked controversy both inside and outside Indian Country. Nixon administration officials dismissed the demonstrators as naïve agitators, raising a red herring of renegotiating old treaties that distracted the public from what they viewed as the real problems Indians faced on their reservations.<sup>99</sup> They derided the AIM activists for wanting publicity rather than realistic solutions.<sup>100</sup> Others like Vine Deloria, Jr., however, saw the Wounded Knee protestors as heroes standing up for a noble albeit unattainable vision.<sup>101</sup> Deloria wrote that “Wounded Knee marked the first sustained modern protest by aboriginal peoples against the Western European interpretation of history.”<sup>102</sup> He praised their declaration of independence for its refusal to accept “the definitions which the American legal system had used to cover up the status of Indian tribes and make them appear to be merely a minor domestic problem of the United States.”<sup>103</sup> Speaking from the perspective of the movement and toward a radical audience that also distrusted and dismissed the American political establishment, *Akwesasne Notes*' coverage of the protestors obviously tended toward the latter narrative.

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<sup>96</sup> *Voices from Wounded Knee*, 2

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> Deloria, 81.

<sup>99</sup> Pierre Castile, 131.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> Deloria, 82.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

Two full issues of *Notes* featured in-depth coverage of the events at Wounded Knee. Because the AIM leaders trusted *Notes*, they allowed reporters from the paper unrivaled access into internal meetings.<sup>104</sup> In the tense days of violent struggle, *Notes* was the only publication able to get behind the lines and spend significant time among those in the occupation.<sup>105</sup> Reporters for *Notes* presented what they saw and were able to effectively relay much of what the protestors were saying and doing inside Wounded Knee. Just like in its the Trail of Broken Treaties coverage, *Notes* devoted more time than other publications to the historical context of the events. Unlike in the mainstream accounts, *Notes* crafted a deep historical narrative of the Oglala Sioux and Pine Ridge, including what had happened to the tribe throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>106</sup> *Notes* correspondents presented the struggle at Wounded Knee as the ultimate “exercise of aboriginal self-determination based on the desire to maintain a distinct indigenous political and cultural identity.”<sup>107</sup>

It is fair, however, to acknowledge that *Notes* was openly subjective and partisan in its approach to the occupation.<sup>108</sup> *Notes*, just like most of the occupiers at Wounded Knee, was an outside organization that was choosing one side of a fight between two factions within the Oglala Lakota tribe. *Notes* only covered what the occupiers said and did not seek out the viewpoint of Dick Wilson or his supporters.<sup>109</sup> The narrative in *Notes* was black and white story of good against evil that made Wilson and his supporters out to be simple villains and symbols for all that Red Power activists found wrong with

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<sup>104</sup> George-Kanentiio, 130.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Sotsisowah, “A Historical Look At Pine Ridge,” *Akwesasne Notes*, April 1973, 19.

<sup>107</sup> George-Kanentiio, 132.

<sup>108</sup> *Voices from Wounded Knee*, 3.

<sup>109</sup> Tim Giago, “Misguided Advocacy Journalism Twists Facts,” *The Lakota Times*, February 12, 1991, 3.

“assimilationist” and “collaborating” tribal governments.<sup>110</sup> This type of coverage did not seek to tell all sides of the story and allow readers to decide for themselves who was right. Instead, *Notes* accepted the occupiers as heroes at face value and amplified their messages and perspectives as fact without using a critical or questioning filter.

*Notes* gathered so many detailed accounts from Wounded Knee, that the staff could not all fit all of it into a newspaper issue. In order to deliver the full picture of what they had seen, the editors of *Notes* decided it was necessary to publish a full-length book. Although the paper was still operating at a loss and Gambill was facing deportation problems because the U.S. government wanted to get rid of him for political reasons, the *Notes* staff thought it necessary to create an authoritative account of the happenings at Wounded Knee from the perspective of those in the occupation.<sup>111</sup>

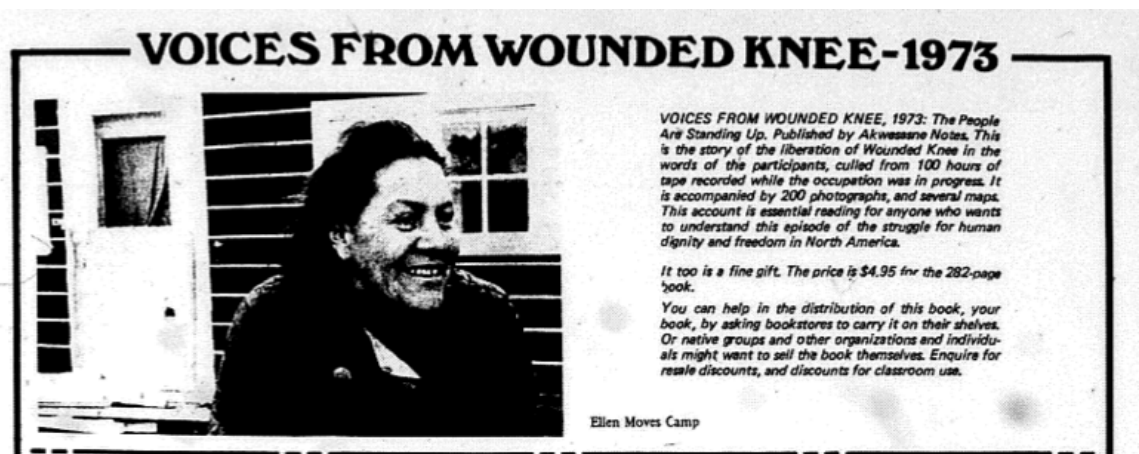


Fig. 6: Advertisement for *Voices from Wounded Knee* inside an issue of *Notes*<sup>112</sup>

The book came out a year after the occupation because of the time it took to compile it and troubles finding funding for printing costs.<sup>113</sup> *Notes* staff culled through 100 hours of

<sup>110</sup> Giago, “Misguided Advocacy Journalism Twists Facts.”

<sup>111</sup> George-Kanentiio, 133.

<sup>112</sup> “Voices From Wounded Knee Advertisement,” *Akwesasne Notes*, April 1975, 16.



tape-recorded interviews of occupation participants, and hundreds of photographs to produce its content.<sup>114</sup> When the 282-page *Voices From Wounded Knee* was finally published, it sold thousands of copies and became the key primary source of information about the occupation. Journalist John Koster praised the book, calling it “a very valuable corrective to people who think everything is quiet out West.”<sup>115</sup> Koster defended the position the book presented, writing, “If the book’s partisan stand seems self-righteous, tenuous, and propagandistic, the reader should reflect that almost everything the book asserts has since been confirmed.”<sup>116</sup>

For its in-depth coverage of the Trail of Broken Treaties and Wounded Knee, *Akwesasne Notes* received journalism awards from across the country.<sup>117</sup> The readership of *Notes* increased dramatically to over 125,000 by the end of 1976.<sup>118</sup> As the Red Power movement began to wane in the late 1970s, however, *Notes* began to lose its impact. Gambill stepped down as editor in 1977, and the next editor John Mohawk moved *Notes* more in the direction of covering indigenous struggles outside of the United States and efforts by North American indigenous leaders to bring concerns to international bodies like the United Nations.<sup>119</sup> While these were critical issues, they did not carry the same punch as the confrontational politics of Red Power. Readership shrunk down to 10,000 by 1979.<sup>120</sup> *Notes* continued publishing throughout the 1980s and into the mid-1990s,

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<sup>113</sup> George-Kanentiio, 133.

<sup>114</sup> “Voices From Wounded Knee Advertisement.”

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Murphy and Murphy, 90.

<sup>118</sup> George-Kanentiio, 134.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid, 135.

advocating for the assertion and preservation of distinct indigenous rights and traditional culture.<sup>121</sup>

### **Strengths and Shortcomings**

*Akwesasne Notes* was a force to be reckoned with during the 1970s. The paper galvanized an enthusiastic base of militant “traditionalists.” Its uncompromising and confrontational approach won over a loyal readership of intellectuals and activists.<sup>122</sup> But its extreme stances did not speak for all of Indian Country. *Notes* dismissed all Indians who sought to assimilate to “white society” or accept anything less than complete indigenous sovereignty. In a 1970 editorial, Tom Porter wrote: “Those among us who want to become assimilated, who want to become white. We wish you well in your choice. But do not do that here.”<sup>123</sup>

*Notes* discredited and distrusted those Indians and tribal governments who seemed too accommodating to the federal governments of the United States and Canada. *Notes* also ran very little coverage of legislative or court actions in either the United States or Canada. There was very little effort to reach out to members of Congress or executive branch officials to try to educate them or find areas of common ground. Unlike tribal newspapers, like the *Navajo Times*, which were tied to tribal governments that desperately appealed to federal officials to avoid termination, *Notes* angrily opposed and confronted the federal government and any Indians who collaborated with assimilationist policies. Without compromise, they were never able to achieve any of the things they

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<sup>121</sup> George-Kanentiio, 137.

<sup>122</sup> Murphy and Murphy, 89.

<sup>123</sup> Tom Porter, “Editorial,” *Akwesasne Notes*, June 1970, 4.

desired. *Notes* advanced ideals of indigenous separatism and sovereignty that may have been noble, but these visions were also politically unrealistic and infeasible in the twentieth century American political system.

*Notes*' uncompromising nature made an enemy out of a powerful potential ally. The Nixon administration, for all of its failings, was actually pretty progressive in Indian affairs and receptive to the concerns of tribes.<sup>124</sup> President Nixon released a policy statement on Indian policy early in his first term that officially endorsed tribal self-determination and rejected termination policies.<sup>125</sup> His administration made overtures to Indian Country leaders and granted momentous decisions such as giving back thousands of acres of land to Taos Pueblo, reversing the termination of tribes like the Menominee of Wisconsin, and passing the Alaska Natives Claims Settlement Act of 1971.<sup>126</sup> The administration pushed for comprehensive self-determination legislation, which was finally realized after Watergate in the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975.<sup>127</sup> But very little of this narrative was present in *Notes*. The paper ran coverage of Nixon's 1970 Indian Message, but expressed skepticism. When the Self-Determination Act passed in 1975, *Notes* published zero articles about it. Nixon administration officials responded to Red Power activists and paid attention to them—as can be seen in their substantive responses to the Twenty Points of the Trail of Broken Treaties.<sup>128</sup> But *Notes*' refusal to acknowledge good deeds made the administration an opponent rather than a partner in the fight for tribal sovereignty.

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<sup>124</sup> Pierre-Castile, 76.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid, 91.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, 147.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid, 168.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid, 128.

Refusal to work within the established power structure also made it a constant struggle to keep *Notes* operational. Issues were regularly delayed when funding became tight or when the paper's operations were halted by the government and other agitators.<sup>129</sup> Because *Notes* relied on donations and shunned advertising revenue, the paper was always strapped for cash and resources.<sup>130</sup> The amateur nature of the paper sometimes produced an atmosphere of unprofessionalism.<sup>131</sup> It also made the inherent and unnuanced biases of the paper plainly obvious. The leadership structure under Gambill was loose, and because assignments and positions were voluntary, there was always heavy staff turnover.<sup>132</sup>

Nevertheless, despite these shortcomings, *Akwesasne Notes* produced incredible content that challenged common notions of indigenous peoples. The paper showed that Natives were engaged and wanted to retake control over their own affairs. *Notes* inspired a generation of young activists to take action and demand change. Its radical voice acted as a calling for an authentic and distinct American Indian political and cultural identity and as a warning to those in power that American Indians were not going to passively accept the status quo. And it provided in-depth firsthand accounts of underreported stories and interviewed marginalized people who had been absent from the narratives printed by mainstream media sources.

*Notes* captured the intense anger and dissatisfaction that ran rampant throughout Indian Country and united a widespread network of dissidents to act in unison to confront the federal government and American society. But oppositional and confrontational anger

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<sup>129</sup> George-Kanentiio, 134.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

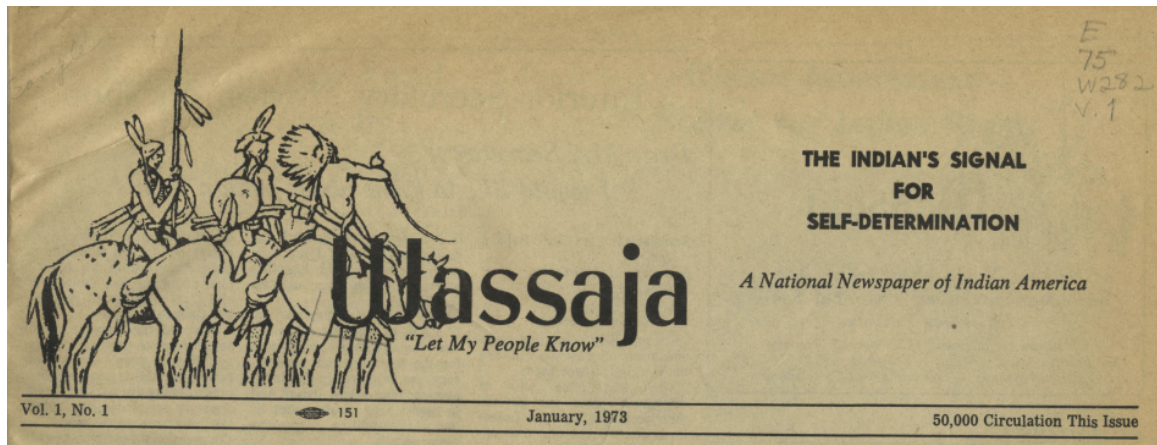
<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

was inherently limited in its ability to create positive change. In order for self-determination to become a reality, Indian activists also needed to find a way to work toward realistic solutions within the American political system. The national Indian newspaper that would become a more reasoned and pragmatic activist force for self-determination, *Wassaja*, began in the wake of Red Power activism and tried to transform militant anger into real progress for American Indians.

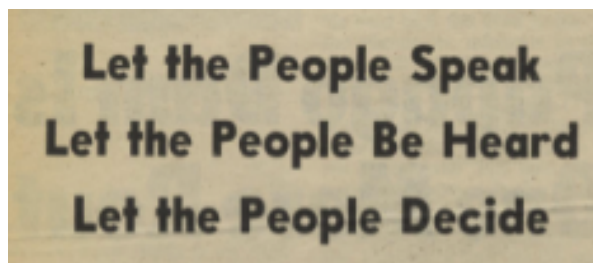
## Chapter Four

### The Indian's Signal for Self-Determination



*“We want, we need, and we must have decision-making power on all levels: planning, training, organization, direction, and evaluation of our government, our programs, our funds, and our lives...today and in the future. Wassaja is dedicated to this goal.”*<sup>1</sup>

—Rupert Costo, Editor of *Wassaja* (1973)



*“Only a national newspaper can deliver hard political news, exert pressure in opening up channels of information, and create a system of uniform information delivery that has a chance of effecting needed changes. Indeed, only a national newspaper has the clout to ‘let the other people know’ what the Indian needs, demands, and expects—namely his rights as a First American.”*<sup>2</sup>

—Jeannette Costo, Editor of *Wassaja* (1978)

<sup>1</sup> Rupert Costo, “Self-Determination,” *Wassaja*, January 1973, 2.

<sup>2</sup> Jeannette Costo, “Foreward,” in *Let My People Know: American Indian Journalism, 1828-1978*, James E. Murphy and Sharon M. Murphy, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981), xi.

The message rang out loud and clear in the first issue of *Wassaja*. It was fair and justified to be upset with the deplorable state of Indian affairs. It was unacceptable to passively accept conditions and policies that threatened the very existence of tribes and American Indian people. But it was not enough to angrily protest like the American Indian Movement did. It was not enough to conjure up utopian visions about separate and completely autonomous Indian nations that could be completely self-reliant like *Akwesasne Notes*. Instead, *Wassaja* told readers to become informed about the wonky details of policy process, to strategically target the federal and tribal establishment, and to advocate for feasible and just solutions to real problems facing Indian Country.<sup>3</sup>

Within the pages of that first issue was a clear signal that showed how high up the newspaper wanted to reach in finding an influential audience. Editor Rupert Costo scanned a letter he had recently sent to President Richard Nixon (Figure 2).<sup>4</sup> Unsurprisingly, Costo called out the federal government and the White House in the letter for not doing enough to aid American Indians, especially in water rights. What was surprising was that Costo had specific policy concerns and clear and achievable recommendations. He urged the Nixon administration to reappoint two men who were well versed in water issues and were sympathetic and responsive to tribes to the Bureau of Indian Affairs.<sup>5</sup> The Trail of Broken Treaties occupation of the BIA headquarters had displaced both men from their positions.<sup>6</sup> These men were vital, Costo wrote, because they gave Indians proper advocates in the federal government.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Rupert Costo, "Self-Determination."

<sup>4</sup> Rupert Costo, "An Appeal to the President," *Wassaja*, January 1973, 17.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

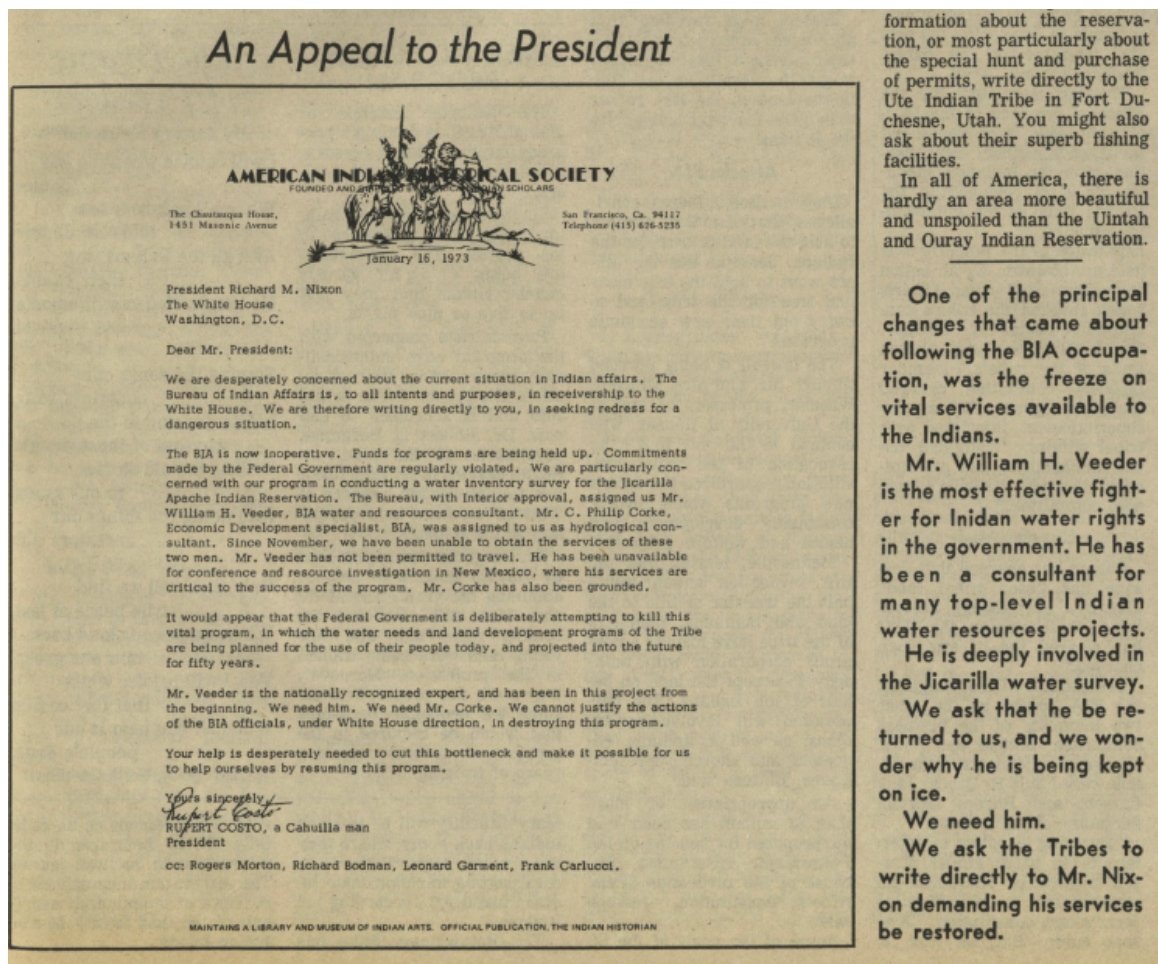


Fig. 2: Letter to President Nixon in the first issue of *Wassaja*<sup>8</sup>

The specific issues raised are not as important as what the letter represented. The front cover of the issue had boldly proclaimed: “Indians Face Genocide: Water Rights Number One Survival Issue.”<sup>9</sup> The issue showed the gravity of water crises and contentious water rights conflicts in various places across Indian Country.<sup>10</sup> *Wassaja* wanted to inform its readers about the grim facts, but the editors of the paper intended to do more than just teach. Costo’s letter to President Nixon served as a model for his readers to follow. If Indians wanted to change their situation for the better, they were

<sup>8</sup> Rupert Costo, “An Appeal to the President.”

<sup>9</sup> “Indians Face Genocide: Water Rights Number One Survival Issue,” *Wassaja*, January 1973, 1.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.



going to have to put pressure on those who had the power to change things. Indians would need to learn about issues that directly affected their lives and learn how to make bureaucrats and policy makers listen to them. Until Congress and the President of the United States began to take their concerns seriously, Indians would continue to languish under oppressive policies and miserable living conditions. In contrast with the Red Power espoused in *Akwesasne Notes*, the self-determination activism that *Wassaja* promoted involved working within the American legal and political systems to find realistic ways to achieve incremental progress toward self-determination.

Rupert and Jeaneatte Henry Costo founded *Wassaja* in 1973, at a time when Indians most needed a reasoned voice that would report the facts and promote realistic policy changes for Indian Country.<sup>11</sup> The Costos already had extensive experience promoting education about Indian affairs. Through their San Francisco-based American Indian Historical Society, which they had founded after retiring from their careers, the Costos had the organization and funding to support an ambitious newspaper project. The Costos hoped that *Wassaja*—named in honor of Carlos Montezuma’s earlier newspaper—would educate all Indian people about their rights and influence Indian Country leaders and federal and state policymakers to create positive policy changes that would empower Indians to take control over their affairs.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> James E. Murphy and Sharon M. Murphy, *Let My People Know: American Indian Journalism, 1828-1978*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981), 81.

<sup>12</sup> Murphy and Murphy, 80-85.

## The Costos

Rupert Costo grew up during the 1910s and 1920s in the Cahuilla Reservation in Anza, California, near Riverside.<sup>13</sup> He was immersed in his small tribe's culture and politics and developed a strong tribal and Indian identity.<sup>14</sup> As a young man, Costo's athletic talents allowed him to travel off his reservation to play for basketball and football teams in colleges and universities. He attended the Haskell Institute in Lawrence, Kansas, Riverside City College, and Whittier College.<sup>15</sup> At Whittier, Costo played football for Head Coach "Chief" Wallace Newman, a La Jolla Indian working at a predominantly white private college.<sup>16</sup> One of Costo's teammates on the Fighting Poets was future president Richard Nixon.<sup>17</sup> Biographers of President Nixon have suggested that his close ties to "Chief" Newman influenced him to have a soft spot for American Indian issues.<sup>18</sup> It is likely that Costo's early-in-life connection with a future president convinced him later on that he could find receptive ears among the most powerful federal policy makers.

For much of his adult life, Costo worked as a highway engineer, hydrologist, meteorologist, and surveyor for the State of California, but his passion remained in fighting for American Indian rights.<sup>19</sup> Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, he helped his Cahuilla tribe start an electrical cooperative, a farm bureau, and soil conservation district,

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<sup>13</sup> "Rupert Costo," in *Encyclopedia of American Indian History*, Bruce E. Johansen and Barry M. Pritzner ed., (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2007), 700-701.

<sup>14</sup> "Rupert Costo," in *Encyclopedia of American Indian History*, 700.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Geore Pierre Castile, *To Show Heart: Native American Self-Determination and Federal Indian Policy, 1960-1975*, (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1998), 75.

<sup>19</sup> Cheryl A. Metoyer-Duran, "Guide to the Rupert Costo Archive of the American Indian," (Riverside: University of Riverside, 2002), vii.

all aimed at helping the tribe become self-sufficient.<sup>20</sup> Costo served as the tribal chairman and official tribal spokesman for the Cahuillas for eight years. He was always engaged in the politics of Indian affairs. In the 1930s, Costo was one of the major protestors of the Indian Reorganization Act, which he thought would place federal government puppets in charge of tribes.<sup>21</sup> When termination policies began to take effect in the 1950s, Costo denounced them and sent letters to congressional leaders.<sup>22</sup> By the time he met his wife, Jeannette, Rupert Costo was already an active political voice.

Jeannette Henry, an Eastern Cherokee descendent, ran away from home at a young age before she could ever establish a strong tribe-specific identity.<sup>23</sup> Henry found work as a news reporter for the *Detroit Free Press* in the late 1930s.<sup>24</sup> After moving out to Southern California, she continued working in journalism at newspaper in Corona and then as a public relations officer for Blue Shield.<sup>25</sup> She knew how the media operated and how to disseminate clear messages and advocate for causes through the press.

Henry met and married Rupert Costo in the early 1950s and soon moved with him to the cosmopolitan and progressive Haight-Ashbury neighborhood of San Francisco.<sup>26</sup> For the rest of their lives, the Costos devoted themselves to bringing social justice to American Indians. In 1964, they helped found the American Indian Historical Society with other individuals in San Francisco who were from various tribes across Indian

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<sup>20</sup> Metoyer-Duran, vii.

<sup>21</sup> "Rupert Costo," 700.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> "Jeannette Henry Costo," in *Encyclopedia of American Indian History*, Bruce E. Johansen and Barry M. Pritzner ed., (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2007), 700.

<sup>24</sup> Metoyer-Duran, viii.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

Country.<sup>27</sup> Rupert Costo served as the Society's only president from its founding through its dissolution in 1986.<sup>28</sup> The Society worked to protect Native gravesites, correct disinformation about Indians in state textbooks, promote Native artists, defend land and water claims, and publish academic journals and books.<sup>29</sup>

In 1973, in the aftermath of Alcatraz and the Trail of Broken Treaties, the Costos recognized that there was enough fury in Indian Country to put pressure on Washington officials.<sup>30</sup> But unlike the editors of *Akwesasne Notes*, the Costos did not necessarily think militant, and sometimes violent, Red Power demonstrations were the best way to promote self-determination.<sup>31</sup> President Nixon had already reversed the federal government's official Indian policies of termination in his 1970 Indian Message and promised to pass self-determination legislation, which would align with his administration's larger governing philosophy of "New Federalism."<sup>32</sup> The Costos knew, however, that promises would not be enough. Efforts in Congress had stalled, and many of the Nixon administration's promises were falling by the wayside. The Costos needed to find a way to inform and influence Indians and politicians so they could move policy in the direction of self-determination and restoration of treaty rights. With that in mind, the Costos, both in their sixties, started *Wassaja* with the purpose of promoting factual information about the real situation in Indian Country and advocating vigorously for self-determination.

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<sup>27</sup> Metoyer-Duran, viii

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> "Rupert Costo," 701.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Pierre-Castile, 91.

## ***Wassaja's Beginning***

From the outset, the Costos framed *Wassaja's* purpose and priorities clearly. Taking up the full last page of the first issue, the paper laid out the vision for itself (Figure 3).

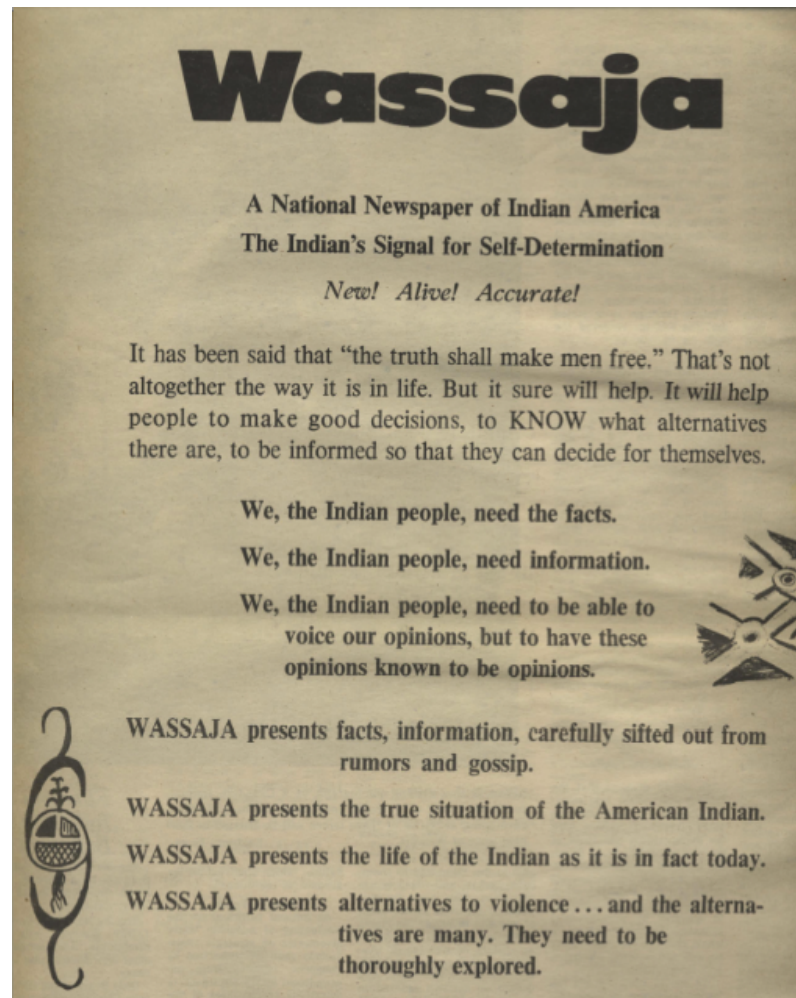


Fig. 3: A description of *Wassaja* in the first issue<sup>33</sup>

*Wassaja* would present the “true situation of the American Indian...as it is in fact today.”<sup>34</sup> By educating people about accurate facts of life in Indian Country, the Costos hoped that they would inspire most readers to form opinions and voice them loudly to

<sup>33</sup> “Wassaja,” *Wassaja*, January 1973, 24.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

those in power.<sup>35</sup> But it wanted the people to voice their opinions peacefully.

“WASSAJA presents alternatives to violence,” the Costos wrote, “and the alternatives are many. They need to be explored thoroughly.”<sup>36</sup> Unlike *Akwesasne Notes*, which glorified the violent and militant tactics of Red Power organizations, *Wassaja* would try to promote more measured and cool-headed methods of political activism. The paper also hoped to become a “National Newspaper of Indian America.”<sup>37</sup> Because the paper was not based on a specific reservation and was not beholden to any tribal governments or B.I.A. agencies, like the *Navajo Times* was, *Wassaja* was in a unique position that would allow it to impartially cover all of Indian Country—though it would admittedly be easier to cover issues and news coming from larger or more accessible tribal communities.<sup>38</sup>

The Costos had lived in relatively wealthy San Francisco for over a decade and worked most of their lives in relatively well-paying jobs. It was fair to wonder how connected the Costos were to the daily lives of average Indians living in urban slums and remote reservations. Nevertheless, they empathized with fellow Indian people and saw themselves as lucky Indians who had managed to put themselves in a position of relative influence. They would try to act, much as the original *Wassaja*, Carlos Montezuma, had in fighting for Indians from a position of prestige and influence within American society.<sup>39</sup> The phrases they used in their newer *Wassaja* came from their inspiration. Montezuma had called his newspaper “Freedom’s Signal for the Indian.”<sup>40</sup> The Costo’s *Wassaja* proclaimed on its masthead that it was to be “The Indian’s Signal for Self-

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<sup>35</sup> “Wassaja,” *Wassaja*, January 1973, 24

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Murphy and Murphy, 81.

<sup>39</sup> “Carlos Montezuma—Fighter for Indian Rights,” *Wassaja*, January 1973, 3.

<sup>40</sup> Peter Iverson, *Carlos Montezuma and the Changing World of American Indians* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), 113.

Determination.”<sup>41</sup> Montezuma’s paper had demanded that the B.I.A. “Let My People Go.”<sup>42</sup> The Costos wanted to “Let My People Know.”<sup>43</sup> Besides taking Montezuma’s name and language, the Costos hoped that their paper would channel his spirit of fighting for the Indians’ ability to live in the modern world. By informing the American public, Indian activists, and politicians about the facts and real issues in Indian Country the Costos hoped to set the federal Indian policy agenda on a wise strategic course toward tribal self-determination and survival of Native culture.

The way *Wassaja* would cover Indian Country activism became apparent in its second issue on in its coverage of the American Indian Movement’s 1973 occupation of Wounded Knee. Unlike *Akwesasne Notes*, which allied itself with the Red Power movement and portrayed its leaders in a nearly universally positive light, *Wassaja* took a more measured approach. The opening sentence of the front page story on the occupation opened: “Here are the facts.”<sup>44</sup> Instead of writing heroic epics or taking an obviously supportive tone, *Wassaja* did its best to present the context and the complete truth of what was happening at Wounded Knee. The paper showed some sympathy for the AIM leaders and Oglala occupiers of the town, but not unquestioning approval. The editorial on Wounded Knee read: “No one has the right to condemn or criticize those who have chosen to make a stand at Wounded Knee... We have only the right to help provide alternatives to the kind of violence that may lose the lives of our people.”<sup>45</sup> Rather than celebrate violent militant confrontations, *Wassaja* wanted leaders to recognize the real

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<sup>41</sup> “Masthead,” *Wassaja*, January 1973, 1.

<sup>42</sup> Iverson, 113.

<sup>43</sup> “Masthead.”

<sup>44</sup> Bette Crous Mele, “Wounded Knee Seen Symbol of Resistance,” *Wassaja*, February 1973, 1.

<sup>45</sup> “Alternatives to Violence,” *Wassaja*, February 1973, 2.

issues behind the demonstrations and to get serious about addressing real problems within the Pine Ridge Reservation and in Indian Country at large.

Wise from years of following Indian affairs and being involved in the Civil Rights Movement, the Costos knew that militant violence would not be the way to convince government power brokers to act in Indians' favor. From the Costos' view, Indians needed to find a way to make their voices heard without reverting to self-destructive aggression.<sup>46</sup> Tribes and tribal citizens had to prove that they were capable of taking responsibility over their own affairs without erupting into factions, in-fighting, and revolts. Alternatively, the federal government also needed to prove that it was willing to hear Indian grievances and uphold its trust by living up to the agreements made in treaties with tribal nations. *Wassaja* called on the federal government to start a full-scale investigation of treaty violations and work toward enfranchising tribal communities.<sup>47</sup> *Wassaja* told its Indian readers to tap into the frustration in Indian Country evidenced by Red Power uprisings and to redirect it into working peaceably within the political system to create real change. At the same time, the paper warned powerful politicians that if they did not start to give Indians rights to adequate resources for survival or afford tribes true self-determination, these types of demonstrations were unlikely to stop.

Over its first few years of publishing, *Wassaja* made a name for itself by reporting on issues and problems that were rarely or poorly covered by the mainstream press. Stories ran on education of Indian children, voting rights of Indians, water and land rights, treaty violations, explanations of tribal and federal legal matters, and the activities

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<sup>46</sup> "Alternatives to Violence."

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.



of the Bureau of Indian Affairs.<sup>48</sup> Long reports detailed the history and cultures of many tribes across Indian Country.<sup>49</sup> The works of significant Indian artists and scholars also received publicity through articles and critiques in the *Wassaja* Arts and Books sections.<sup>50</sup> *Wassaja* did its best to provide useful resources and facts to those who needed to become more informed about issues important to Indian Country.

Readership grew rather quickly because the professional quality of *Wassaja*'s product was clear from the publication's inception. The newspaper's first issue had a circulation of 50,000 readers.<sup>51</sup> And within the first couple issues, readership climbed above 80,000.<sup>52</sup> Given that very few newsstands, stores, airports, or other mass circulation areas carried the paper, that level of readership was quite high.<sup>53</sup> *Wassaja* did not have the same grassroots network of distributors that *Akwesasne Notes* possessed, but the paper still made significant efforts to spread its message widely. *Wassaja* sent free issues to tribes, Indian organizations, and Indian schools.<sup>54</sup> The paper also relied on reader contact, asking that readers send in names of other potential readers for free trial issues.<sup>55</sup> As *Wassaja* established itself as a credible voice in Indian affairs, more and more readers requested subscriptions. Based on the wide-range of places that writers of letters to the editor wrote from, *Wassaja* was reaching people from all over the United States.<sup>56</sup> More importantly, within the first few issues, members of Congress with

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<sup>48</sup> Murphy and Murphy, 81.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> "Books," *Wassaja*, September 1973, 21.

<sup>51</sup> Murphy and Murphy, 85.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Murphy and Murphy, 85.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> "Voice of the Indian," *Wassaja*, June 1973, 2.

significant Indian populations in their districts and B.I.A. and Cabinet officials began to send in letters and op-ed pieces to *Wassaja*, showing that they were paying attention.<sup>57</sup>

### **News Across Indian Country**

In its efforts to promote self-determination across Indian Country, *Wassaja* focused on reporting stories, training and supporting Native journalists, and amplifying prominent Native voices from as many tribes, activist organizations, and urban Indian communities as possible. Trying to represent all of Indian Country started with covering news and issues from across the far-reaching geography of Indian Country. In its first issue, *Wassaja* ran stories on the San Juan-Chama River Project in New Mexico, treaty and land rights violations for the Colville and Shoshone-Bannock tribes in the Pacific Northwest, a tribal school opening on a Blackfeet reservation in Alberta, Canada, and Eastern tribes seeking federal recognition.<sup>58</sup> Future issues would continue to cover a diverse set of issues that reflected the diversity of needs and people in Indian Country.

Simply reporting the news, however, did not go far enough. The Costos knew that their paper alone could not possibly do a good enough job speaking for all of Indian Country. The Costos recognized a dearth of trained Native journalists in both the mainstream and tribal media.<sup>59</sup> *Wassaja* addressed this problem in a few ways. The paper tried to serve as a training ground and apprenticeship program for inexperienced Native journalists from across Indian Country.<sup>60</sup> Former writers from *Wassaja* frequently went

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<sup>57</sup> Rogers Morton, "Secretary Rogers: His Position on Indian Affairs," *Wassaja*, June 1973, 6.

<sup>58</sup> "January Issue," *Wassaja*, January 1973, 1-24.

<sup>59</sup> Murphy and Murphy, 84.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

on work on tribal newspapers or found their own projects.<sup>61</sup> Tim Giago, later the founding editor of *Lakota Times* and *Indian Country Today* and founder of the Native American Journalists Association had his first articles published in *Wassaja*.<sup>62</sup> As an independent newspaper that used professional journalism techniques of investigative reporting and clear writing, *Wassaja* also hoped to serve as a gleaming example of how valuable Native newspapers could be if tribes and other Indian communities invested resources in them.<sup>63</sup>

The paper also did much to directly aid other Indian publications. *Wassaja* also implemented a liberal sharing policy that allowed any Indian publications to reprint *Wassaja* content and articles in their entirety at no cost.<sup>64</sup> For many small tribal newspapers with small staffs and no resources to effectively cover much beyond their reservation, the free content from *Wassaja* was a lifesaver.<sup>65</sup> The Costos also made one of the first efforts unite editors and writers of Native newspapers from across the continent. They hosted an annual meeting of Native journalists in their Haight-Ashbury home, where attendants discussed freedom of the press issues, how to gain access to important stories, and how different Indian newspapers could work collaboratively to improve their profession.<sup>66</sup> These meetings would inspire the later creation of the Native American Journalists Association.

To inspire other Indians into action, *Wassaja* also tried to prominently feature Native leaders and activists who were already doing their part to make their voices heard

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<sup>61</sup> Murphy and Murphy, 84.

<sup>62</sup> Jim Carrier, "South Dakota Indian Journalist Gave Voices to a People Long Ignored," *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 23, 2007.

<sup>63</sup> Murphy and Murphy, 84.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 85.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

by those in power. In a regular feature, “People You Should Know,” *Wassaja* profiled Indian educators, political leaders, activists, and scholars (Figure 4).<sup>67</sup> These men and women served as exemplars for the Indian readers of the paper. They dispelled negative stereotypes of Indians that the general public and many federal and state government officials who were reading *Wassaja* may have held. Unlike Red Power protestors, many of these men and women were also very modern and assimilated into the mainstream, showing that *Wassaja* did not hold such strict standards as *Akwesasne Notes* in needing people to maintain traditional lifestyles and distinctly indigenous outward appearances to be considered Indian.



Fig. 4: “People You Should Know” feature showing notable Indian leaders<sup>68</sup>

<sup>67</sup> “People You Should Know,” *Wassaja*, February 1973, 17.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

If there was a drawback to the effort to present Indian Country leaders favorably, it was that corrupt tribal officials for the most part got a free pass in *Wassaja*. Because *Wassaja* was not based on reservations, the paper relied in part on reports from tribal newspapers like the *Navajo Times* for their news from across Indian Country.<sup>69</sup> Those newspapers were almost always propped up by tribal governments and only wrote positive stories about their tribal officials.<sup>70</sup> *Wassaja* took many of these stories on good faith and promoted the interests of tribal leaders who were being portrayed well in tribal media. Peter MacDonald, the prominent Chairman of the Navajo Nation, regularly contributed commentary to *Wassaja* in part because the Costos read and approved of the positive contributions the *Navajo Times* said MacDonald's administration was making for the Navajo people.<sup>71</sup> It only came out later that MacDonald was misusing tribal funds and taking advantage of his powerful position to promote corruption.<sup>72</sup> Nevertheless, the Costos acknowledged that *Wassaja* had this blindspot and did their best to push tribal newspapers to act as watchdogs over their tribal governments.<sup>73</sup> In a 1973 editorial, the Costos told tribal chairmen that if they did not "go back to their people, get their approval, and THEN speak for the position and the policy of their people," they were not entitled to have power over their communities. The only self-determination that the

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<sup>69</sup> Murphy and Murphy, 84.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 90.

<sup>71</sup> Peter MacDonald, "Powerful Forces Test Indian Survival, Navajo Chief Says," *Wassaja*, October 1973, 11.

<sup>72</sup> Sandy Tolan, "Showdown at Window Rock," *New York Times Magazine*, November 26, 1989, accessed March 8, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/11/26/magazine/showdown-at-window-rock.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>.

<sup>73</sup> "Let the People Speak, Let the People Be Heard, Let the People Decide," *Wassaja*, September 1973, 2.

*Wassaja* editors wanted for Indians was one that empowered the people to take control over their own affairs, not one that empowered dictatorial and corrupt tribal officials.<sup>74</sup>

### Indians Go to Washington

If *Wassaja* failed to adequately keep an eye on tribal governments, it overcompensated by keeping an ever watchful eye on the United States federal government. The newspaper existed primarily to put pressure on political leaders in Washington in order to force them to act on improving Indian affairs. Harsh political cartoons called out lawmakers for sitting idly on important Indian issues and condemned the federal bureaucracy for incompetently delivering essential services to Indians (Figures 5 & 6).<sup>75</sup>



Fig. 5: Political cartoon calling on Congress to act on Indian Affairs<sup>76</sup>

<sup>74</sup> "Let the People Speak, Let the People Be Heard, Let the People Decide."

<sup>75</sup> "Haunted House?," *Wassaja*, September 1973, 3; "Implementing Our Indian Programs," *Wassaja*, January 1974, 13.

<sup>76</sup> "Haunted House."

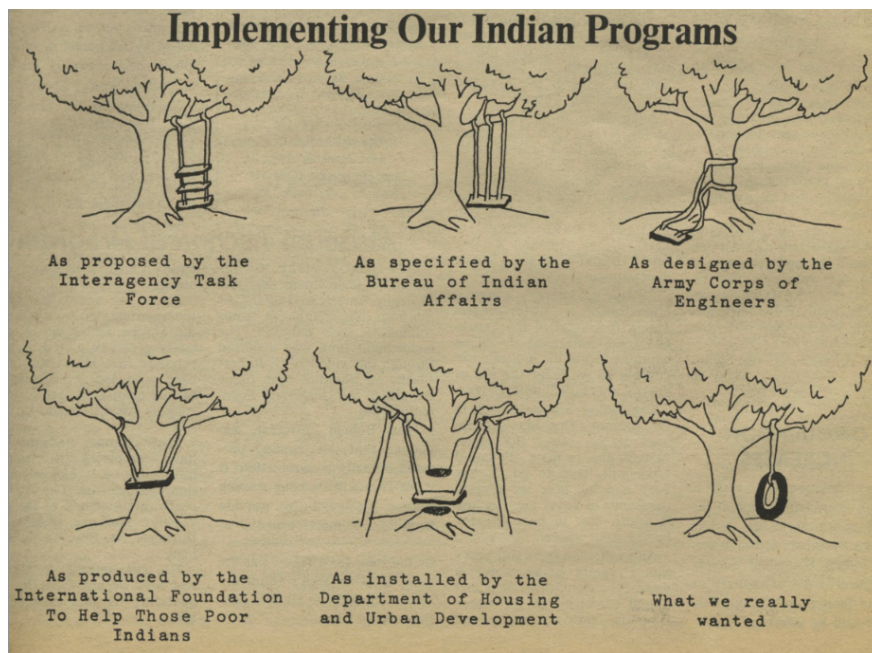


Fig. 6: Cartoon complaining about the federal bureaucracy's mismanagement of Indian programs<sup>77</sup>

Beyond seething images, *Wassaja* also packed substantive punches in its written articles. The paper placed an emphasis on keeping up with what was going on in Washington followed all action and inaction on Indian affairs in the White House, on the Hill, in the courts, and in the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Whenever bills of significance passed or came under consideration in Congress, *Wassaja* was there to write full descriptions of their contents and consequences.<sup>78</sup> The paper printed full statements by senators, White House officials, and Cabinet secretaries alongside critical commentary.<sup>79</sup> In a regular column titled "Law and the American Indian," *Wassaja* staff explained complicated legal issues and suits being filed in courts that carried great significance to tribes and Indian people.<sup>80</sup> To the best of their abilities, *Wassaja* staff tried to present as much accurate

<sup>77</sup> "Implementing Our Indian Programs."

<sup>78</sup> "Tribal Sovereignty and P.L. 93-638," *Wassaja*, November 1975, 2.

<sup>79</sup> Rogers Morton, "Secretary Rogers: His Position on Indian Affairs."

<sup>80</sup> "Law and the American Indian," *Wassaja*, February 1974, 17.



information as possible to their Indian readers about how what was going on in Washington would affect them in their communities.

Equally important was *Wassaja*'s prominent displays of Indians advocating for their rights in Washington. Nearly every time a tribal delegation went to Washington to speak to lawmakers, *Wassaja* featured large front page photos of them next to iconic D.C. landmarks (Figure 8).<sup>81</sup> The paper wanted to give politicians the impression that Indians were actively engaged with their representatives in Congress and were pressing federal officials for accountability. In nearly every issue, alongside coverage of pressing issues and news from Indian communities, there was coverage of some group of Indians traveling to Washington to have their grievances heard. Stories featured Indians hobnobbing at D.C. social events or setting up successful lobbying organizations (Figure 7).<sup>82</sup> *Wassaja* wanted its Indian readers to become inspired by good examples to pressure Washington government officials. And they wanted to make sure that Washington was well aware that Indians were demanding that they pay attention to their concerns.



Fig. 7: Coverage of Indians comfortably socializing with V.P. Rockefeller<sup>83</sup>

<sup>81</sup> "Cheyennes Move on Washington," *Wassaja*, June 1975, 1.

<sup>82</sup> "Indians Make the Social Scene in Capitol," *Wassaja*, November 1975, 8.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.



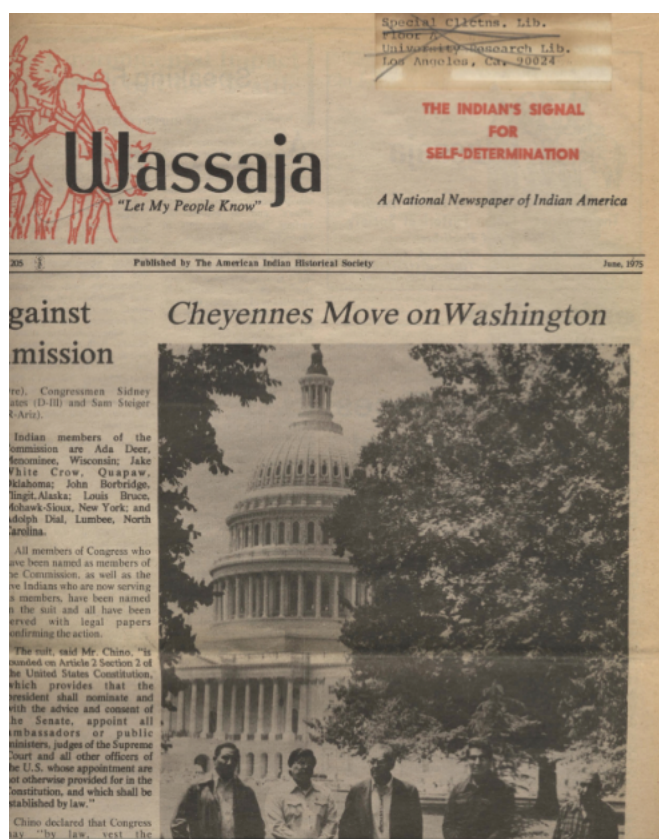


Fig. 8: Front page treatment of the Cheyenne tribe traveling to DC<sup>84</sup>

### Washington Listens

What *Wassaja* did to garner the attention of policy makers seemed to work. Even though the President Nixon and many of his main aides went down in flames due to Watergate, his administration's early promises to Indian Country did not go unfulfilled. Immediately after Nixon entered the White House in 1969—well before *Wassaja* started publishing—he had made overtures to Indian Country and directed some of his top advisors to work toward reversing federal termination policies and promoting tribal self-determination.<sup>85</sup> The president was well aware of the Costo's message of self-determination.<sup>86</sup> The concept of self-determination for tribes fit perfectly into Nixon's

<sup>84</sup> "Cheyennes Move on Washington."

<sup>85</sup> Pierre-Castile, 91.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 93.

larger vision of a “New Federalism” that would give more power and autonomy to state and local governments.<sup>87</sup>

Nixon’s endorsement of self-determination and predisposition to support Indian issues more than previous presidents may have been influenced at least in part by his relationship with the Costos. Based on an old friendship with Rupert dating back to their football days at Whittier and due to the Costos’ long presence in Indian politics in Nixon’s native Southern California, Nixon was close with the Costos.<sup>88</sup> In an oral history interview conducted late in her life, Jeannette Costo recalled, “Nixon was friend...of both of us.”<sup>89</sup> It is likely that Nixon, and by logic his aides, held the Costos’ opinions and coverage of Indian Country in high regard. Records in the Ford Presidential Library even show that Bradley Patterson, Jr., the White House aide tasked with crafting both the Nixon and Ford administrations’ Indian policy goals, read and responded to *Wassaja*.<sup>90</sup> During a pivotal time in Indian policymaking, most powerful office in the United States was paying attention to what *Wassaja* was printing.

The increased attention led to political successes. The greatest sign of the positive impact of *Wassaja*’s pressure on Washington was the passage of the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975. The act, which was directed through Congress by Nixon aides even after his resignation was the culmination of the administrations efforts to improve federal Indian policy. It allowed tribes to contract with

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<sup>87</sup> Pierre-Castile, 93.

<sup>88</sup> Metoyer-Duran, viii.

<sup>89</sup> Jan Erickson, “Transcription of an Oral History Interview with Jeannette Costo,” U.C. Riverside, July 27, 1998, <http://www.ucrhistory.ucr.edu/pdf/costo.pdf>.

<sup>90</sup> “Wassaja Story,” Bradley Patterson Files at the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, September 7, 1976, <http://www.ford.utexas.edu/library/document/0142/1103442.pdf>.

the Bureau of Indian Affairs to run their own education and health programs.<sup>91</sup> The act aligned with the pleas for self-determination and signified an official reversal in federal policy away from termination and toward tribal sovereignty.<sup>92</sup> *Wassaja* ran detailed stories educating readers in tribal communities about the positive effects of the legislation.<sup>93</sup> The paper criticized lawmakers for not doing enough to address the concerns of urban Indians.<sup>94</sup> But overall, *Wassaja* saw the passage of the Self-Determination Act as a major victory and as a reason to keep putting pressure on Washington to produce enlightened Indian policies.<sup>95</sup>

Under the radar for most Americans, the late 1970s saw the passage of a flurry of positive Indian policy action in Washington. The Indian Health Care Improvement Act of 1976 improved incentives for medical professionals to work in tribal communities and improved the capacity of healthcare for urban Indians.<sup>96</sup> In 1977, a Federal Indian Policy Review Commission started by a joint-resolution sponsored by senators and representatives who had appeared in *Wassaja* came out with a sweeping set of recommendations that favored tribal sovereignty and expanded federal trust responsibilities.<sup>97</sup> Also in 1977, President Jimmy Carter elevated Indian issues in the executive branch hierarchy by replacing the commissioner of Indian affairs position, which was multiple levels below the top of the Interior Department, with the Assistant

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<sup>91</sup> “Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act,” in *Documents of United States Indian Policy*, ed. Francis Paul Prucha, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 274.

<sup>92</sup> “Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act.”

<sup>93</sup> “Tribal Sovereignty and P.L. 93-638,” *Wassaja*, November 1975, 2.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> “Indian Health Care Improvement Act,” in *Documents of United States Indian Policy*, ed. Francis Paul Prucha, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 278.

<sup>97</sup> “Final Report of the American Indian Policy Review Commission,” in *Documents of United States Indian Policy*, ed. Francis Paul Prucha, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 281.

Secretary of Indian Affairs position, which would report directly to the Secretary of the Interior.<sup>98</sup>

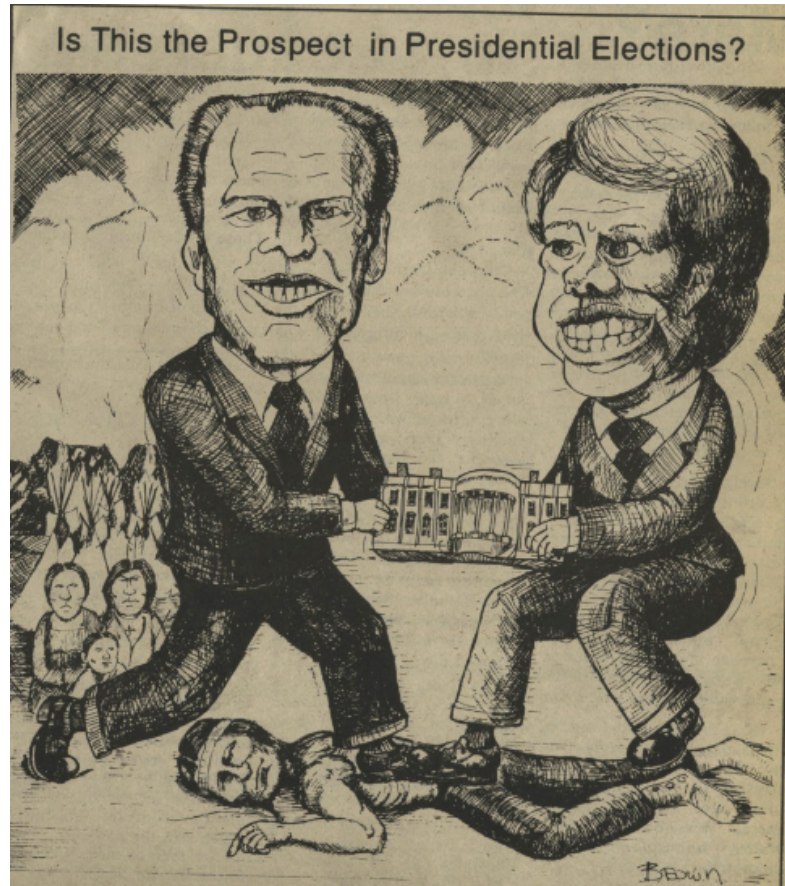


Fig. 9: Cartoon of Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter in issue covering the 1976 election<sup>99</sup>

Perhaps the clearest sign that Washington leaders considered *Wassaja* important was when the campaigns for both candidates for the presidency responded to the paper during the 1976 election.<sup>100</sup> For the first time in history, candidates for the highest office in Washington answered questions about their positions on Indian affairs to an Indian

<sup>98</sup> "Establishment of Assistant Secretary—Indian Affairs," in *Documents of United States Indian Policy*, ed. Francis Paul Prucha, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 284.

<sup>99</sup> "Is This the Prospect in Presidential Elections?," *Wassaja*, October 1976, 5.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

publication.<sup>101</sup> In an internal White House memo, Ford administration aide Bradley Patterson, Jr. advised the campaign to “respond to the *Wassaja* invitation” and to “take a crack at answers to the specific questions *Wassaja* has put to us.”<sup>102</sup> Rather than brush the publication aside by replying with a generic response, Patterson told the campaign that it needed to afford *Wassaja* respect by giving thorough responses. The Carter campaign also provided full-length answers to *Wassaja*’s questions.<sup>103</sup> *Wassaja* had succeeded in creating a platform from which Indians could have their grievances heard by the most powerful men in the nation.

### **The Signal for American Indian Journalism**

*Wassaja*’s life was ultimately short-lived. Like their inspiration, Carlos Montezuma, the Costos had taken on the task of publishing an activist newspaper relatively late in their lives. After 1979, the American Indian Historical Society merged *Wassaja* with its academic journal *The Indian Historian*.<sup>104</sup> The publication only printed issues for another couple of years before shutting down after the Costos lost the energy to keep up production.<sup>105</sup> Nevertheless, in the nearly ten years of its existence, *Wassaja* had demonstrated to Indian Country the power of the press. The Costos mastered the use of the media to craft messages and set the policy agenda on Indian affairs. They learned through experience how to get through to powerful listeners and stand up for a people

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<sup>101</sup> “Candidates Voice Position as Tribes Seek Protection,” *Wassaja*, October 1976, 8.

<sup>102</sup> “Wassaja Story,” Bradley Patterson Files at the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library.

<sup>103</sup> “Carter Responds to Query on Position,” *Wassaja*, October 1976, 10.

<sup>104</sup> “Rupert Costo,” in *Encyclopedia of American Indian History*, 701.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

who had been largely overlooked and oppressed. But even through their successes, the Costos were not satisfied. In 1976, Rupert Costo wrote in a *Wassaja* editorial:

Despite many promises made to the American Indians, starting with the treaties, continuing with the agreements, and on into the present century, the Indian has been negotiated out of his rights to his land, to his water, his natural resources, and his cultural heritage. The right to self-government, and protection of Indian resources, can be achieved only at the price of eternal vigilance. That must be our conclusion judging from the lessons of history.<sup>106</sup>

His newspaper took up that fight and became an inspiration for later Indian journalism efforts. *Wassaja* proved that it was possible to produce high-quality and influential content in an American Indian publication. It was possible to amplify the voices of Indians loudly enough for those in power to hear them and do something about what they were demanding.

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<sup>106</sup> Rupert Costo, "Is This the Prospect in Presidential Elections?," *Wassaja*, October 1976, 5.

## Chapter Five

### Trying to Cover All of Indian Country



*“For too many years, everything written about Indian people was from the white point of view and I felt that we, as Indians, needed to get our point of view across. I’m not talking about a radical point of view that is hardly indicative of the majority of Indians, but a point of view that is too often and too easily overlooked because it is a point of view that does not make sensational headlines.”<sup>1</sup>*

—Tim Giago, Editor of *The Lakota Times* (1981)



*“The demand for a newspaper that would bring the Indian Nations of America closer together through a common vehicle of communications has been a dream of many Indian journalists. Because of the difficulties in securing the financing and finding the Indian professional journalists to make such a dream a reality, the idea has remained only a dream. That is until today.”<sup>2</sup>*

—Tim Giago, Editor of *Indian Country Today* (1992)

<sup>1</sup> Tim Giago, *Notes from Indian Country Volume I* (Pierre, SD: State Publishing Company, 1984), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Tim Giago, “Welcome to Indian Country Today,” *Indian Country Today*, October 8, 1992, A4.

Tim Giago was angry. For too many years, Giago had seen critical issues and events on his native Oglala Lakota Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota either misreported or overlooked by an unresponsive, racist, and ignorant mainstream media.<sup>3</sup> None of the media's coverage of Indian stories came close to reporting an authentic picture of Indian Country.<sup>4</sup> At the newspaper where he worked, the *Rapid City Journal*, Giago was the only Indian staff writer.<sup>5</sup> In fact, Giago was the only Native journalist in the mainstream media in the entire state of South Dakota, a state with nine Indian reservations and tens of thousands of enrolled tribal members.<sup>6</sup> Throughout the 1970s, Indian news had been the state's biggest story, from the AIM occupation of Wounded Knee in 1973 to the multi-year bloody Pine Ridge Civil War that followed. Although these stories should have caused South Dakota's newspapermen to investigate and produce in-depth stories on the reasons that Indian communities in their vicinity were erupting into violence. But according to former editor of the *Rapid City Journal* Jim Carrier, "none of the state's 11 daily newspapers or 145 weeklies covered the mayhem in any depth, relying on the Associated Press or printing nothing at all."<sup>7</sup>

When Carrier hired Giago to write a weekly column, "Notes from Indian Country," in 1979, Giago became the first Native voice in a South Dakota newspaper.<sup>8</sup> But after spending a couple years at the *Journal*, Giago grew frustrated with how little space the paper devoted to reporting on the people and stories of Pine Ridge.<sup>9</sup> He also

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<sup>3</sup> Tim Giago, "Notes from Indian Country Today," *Lakota Times*, July 9, 1983, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Jim Carrier, "South Dakota Indian Journalist Gave Voices to a People Long Ignored," *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 23, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Tim Giago, "Freedom of the Press in Indian Country," *Nieman Reports*, Fall 2005.



recognized that because of infighting and violence, the Oglala Lakota of Pine Ridge had not yet developed their own media like other tribes and activist organizations had during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>10</sup> From his perspective, Giago believed that the media had only heard and reported on the most radical, attention-seeking Indian voices from his community.<sup>11</sup> It was time to tell the stories of everybody in his native community.

With that hope in mind, in 1981, Giago quit his job at the *Journal* and moved with his wife Doris back to Pine Ridge.<sup>12</sup> Giago took out a 4,000 dollar loan to cover the costs of starting the *Lakota Times*, the first independently-owned and operated Indian publication in America.<sup>13</sup> Over the next two decades, Giago's newspaper would grow to become the most influential voice in Indian affairs nationally and a gleaming example of how to bring fair journalism and free discourse to Indian communities.

### **The Defender**

Tim Giago, whose Lakota name Nawica Kjici means "Stands Up for Them" or "Defender," was born in 1934 on the Pine Ridge Reservation.<sup>14</sup> His life experience embodied many different parts of Indian Country and aspects of American Indian life in the twentieth century. In his early years on the reservation, Giago formed a proud Lakota identity as elders and relatives taught him about Lakota culture and history.<sup>15</sup> When he attended the Holy Rosary Indian Mission on the reservation, Giago grew angry when school leaders tried to suppress his Lakota cultural identity, telling him that an indigenous

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<sup>10</sup> Tim Giago, "Freedom of the Press in Indian Country."

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Tim Giago, "Our First Edition of the Lakota Times," *Lakota Times*, July 9, 1981, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Tim Giago, *Notes from Indian Country Volume I*, i.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

identity would not help him live a productive modern life.<sup>16</sup> Giago would spend much of his later journalism career trying to publicly rebut the claim that Indians could not reconcile their indigeneity with life in the contemporary world.

Giago's first exposure to journalism came by chance. When he was serving in the U.S. Navy during the Korean War, Giago's commanding officer at the San Francisco Naval Shipyard saw him typing fast on a typewriter and assigned him to edit the base newspaper, the *PacHunter*.<sup>17</sup> Giago had to learn on the fly how to put out a monthly newspaper by himself that represented life on the base. The experience convinced Giago to add a minor in journalism to his business degree from his studies at San Jose Junior College and the University of Nevada, Reno.<sup>18</sup>

While out in the Bay Area in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Giago came in contact with Rupert and Jeannette Costo, the pioneering Indian historians and journalists who edited *Wassaja*.<sup>19</sup> Giago befriended the Costos and looked to them as mentors. Giago would later describe Rupert Costo as his "friend and teacher."<sup>20</sup> Giago wrote that Costo inspired him by having "the courage of his convictions" and "pound[ing] that sense of standing up for the rights of others into my head."<sup>21</sup> Giago was strongly influenced by *Wassaja*'s mission to tell Indians' stories and educate the public about the realities of life in Indian Country.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Tim Giago, *The Aboriginal Sin: Reflections on the Holy Rosary Indian Mission School*, (San Francisco: The Indian Historian Press, 1975), 15.

<sup>17</sup> Ernestine Chasing Hawk, "Tim Giago Retires from the Newsroom," *Native Times*, March 8, 2011.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Tim Giago, "Walking Away from the Editor's Desk," *Native Sun News*, February 28, 2011.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

Before he ultimately became a journalist, however, Giago put his business degree to use. Giago believed that advancing free enterprise and economic development in Indian Country was the best way to help Indians.<sup>23</sup> In 1974, Giago founded the American Indian Chamber of Commerce and became the organization's first executive director.<sup>24</sup> The AICC encouraged American Indian-owned businesses to work together to prosper and encouraged other businesses on or near Indian communities to cater to Indian consumers and help develop Indian economies.<sup>25</sup> Giago's work with the AICC helped him receive his first recognition in print in a *Wassaja* profile (Figure 1).<sup>26</sup>



Fig. 1: “Indians Helping Indians” feature about Giago at the AICC in *Wassaja*<sup>27</sup>

During his time at the AICC, Giago had two important realizations that would have ramifications for his later career in journalism. The first was that it embedded within

<sup>23</sup> ““Indians Helping Indians’ Is Their Slogan,” *Wassaja*, April 1975, 15.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

Giago a belief that civilization prospers with commerce. The slogan of AICC was “Indians Helping Indians,” which fell in line with the ideals of self-determination as it promoted the idea of Indians helping themselves to improving their conditions.<sup>28</sup> The concept also aligned with conservative principles of “self-help” and the Nixon administration’s “New Federalism,” which gave more power to local communities to control their own political and economic destinies.<sup>29</sup> Giago’s confidence that free enterprise would help Indians develop their economies would also later lead to him seeking advertising revenues to pay for his newspaper’s budgets rather than seek subsidies from tribal governments.<sup>30</sup>

Second, the AICC led to Giago’s temporary move into the American Southwest. The AICC was based in Albuquerque, New Mexico and did much of its early work with Indians from local tribes like the Pueblos, the Apaches, and the Navajos. When living and working with these tribal communities, Giago was able to pick up their tribal publications like the *Jicarilla Chieftain* and the *Navajo Times*. Giago was particularly impressed with the *Navajo Times*, which he thought did an admirable job of presenting “news and information to the Navajo people about tribal government, B.I.A. programs and open[ing] a line of communications to the people.”<sup>31</sup> Giago did not like the *Times*’ was directly tied to the Navajo Tribal Council because he thought it made the paper uncritical and beholden to tribal officials.<sup>32</sup> But Giago saw great value in a reservation community having its own newspaper. The *Navajo Times* covered issues that the mainstream media

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<sup>28</sup> ““Indians Helping Indians’ Is Their Slogan.”

<sup>29</sup> G Geore Pierre Castile, *To Show Heart: Native American Self-Determination and Federal Indian Policy, 1960-1975*, (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1998), 91.

<sup>30</sup> Tim Giago, “Tribal Funding,” in *Notes from Indian Country Volume I*, 6.

<sup>31</sup> Tim Giago, “Our First Edition of the Lakota Times.”

<sup>32</sup> Tim Giago, “Tribal Funding.”

never bothered to look into and talked to people whose voices were never heard in the mainstream media.<sup>33</sup> Giago knew that his native Pine Ridge Reservation lacked this community resource. While reading the *Navajo Times*, Giago concluded that if he were to live up to his name of “Defender,” the best way to do so would be to go into journalism and give his people a stronger voice.<sup>34</sup>

### **Budding Journalism Career**

Giago began his career in journalism in the mid-1970s by working on a few Native journalism projects. With the encouragement of Rupert and Jeannette Costo, Giago began contributing articles to *Wassaja*.<sup>35</sup> Giago also published a book with the help of the Costos on abuse and mistreatment that he witnessed during his time at the Holy Rosary Indian Mission as a child.<sup>36</sup> While under the tutelage of the Costos, Giago absorbed much of their wisdom and then began to branch out into his own journalistic pursuits.

In the mid-1970s, Giago moved from Albuquerque to Farmington, a town in northwestern Four Corners area of New Mexico that borders the Navajo Nation, to write and edit for the *Farmington Daily Times*.<sup>37</sup> At the *Daily Times*, Giago got his first real taste of working in a newsroom. He also got to experience what it was like to work for a mainstream publication near a large Indian community. By working at the *Daily Times*, Giago was able learn the differences between an independent newspaper that relied on

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<sup>33</sup> Tim Giago, “Our First Edition of the Lakota Times.”

<sup>34</sup> Giago, “Our First Edition of the Lakota Times.”

<sup>35</sup> Ernestine Chasing Hawk, “Tim Giago Retires from the Newsroom.”

<sup>36</sup> Tim Giago, *The Aboriginal Sin: Reflections on the Holy Rosary Indian Mission School*.

<sup>37</sup> Tim Giago, “Indian Affairs Aid to Communication,” in *Notes from Indian Country Volume I*, 3.

advertising revenue and a tribal newspaper, like the *Navajo Times*, that relied on tribal government funding.<sup>38</sup> He also learned the extent of bias against Indians in mainstream newsrooms, even ones that were progressive enough to hire Indian writers.<sup>39</sup>

Giago took this knowledge up to his native South Dakota to start up a public interest television show that focused on American Indian issues called *The First Americans* in 1976.<sup>40</sup> The show, which ran weekly on Sunday mornings on the Rapid City station KEVN, became the first television show produced by an American Indian to be broadcast on a commercial station.<sup>41</sup> Giago served as the producer and host of the talk show, which covered debates on Indian affairs, racism against Indians, and perhaps most importantly at the time gave viewers a rare look at multiple local Indian perspectives on the violence and tensions that had been plaguing the Pine Ridge Reservation.<sup>42</sup>

### **Pine Ridge Civil War**

Over the previous few years, Giago's native Pine Ridge Reservation had become the focal point for the national Red Power Movement. The American Indian Movement's violent occupation of Wounded Knee in 1973 had drawn the attention of the national media.<sup>43</sup> Many outside media outlets descended on Pine Ridge looking for an exciting story. From Giago's perspective, the outside media got the story wrong. Giago later wrote, "I have read article written in those terrible days and published in nationally

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<sup>38</sup> Tim Giago, "Erroneous Stories Widely Circulated," in *Notes from Indian Country Volume I*, 78.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> James E. Murphy and Sharon M. Murphy, *Let My People Know: American Indian Journalism, 1828-1978* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981), 132.

<sup>41</sup> "Tim Giago Biography," *Huffington Post*, Accessed April 3, 2013, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tim-giago/>.

<sup>42</sup> Tim Giago, "Things Are Not Always What They Seem," in *Notes from Indian Country Volume I*, 28.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

respected magazines and newspapers that are a disgrace to every objective journalist.”<sup>44</sup> Giago said, mainstream media reporters who had never seen reservation politics did not take the time to properly learn the nuances of the tribal conflict between tribal chairman Dick Wilson’s supporters and opponents.<sup>45</sup> Reporters believed and printed every slanted thing they heard from the occupiers, who adamantly opposed and vilified Wilson, labeling Wilson as a “dictator” and his supporters and tribal police officers as part of a “goon squad.”<sup>46</sup>

According to Giago, the media did not take the time to interview Wilson or his supporters to try to learn each side of the Pine Ridge conflict. Giago was by no means a Wilson apologist. He recognized the rampant poverty and violence that afflicted Pine Ridge citizens under Wilson’s leadership and had his fair share of criticisms of Wilson’s administration.<sup>47</sup> “I was not part of Dick Wilson’s administration,” Giago later said, “nor do I believe that all of the criticisms directed at him were wrong.”<sup>48</sup> But Giago grew frustrated when reading accounts that did not even take the time to seek Wilson’s side of the story or interview even one Wilson supporter—after all a majority of the tribe had supported Wilson to put him in the chairmanship in the first place.<sup>49</sup> And, Giago would point out, Wilson soundly defeated Russell Means, an AIM leader at Wounded Knee, in an election for Oglala Sioux President shortly after the occupation ended, proving that he maintained popular support from many Oglala people.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Tim Giago, “Things Are Not Always What They Seem.”

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Tim Giago, “Choosing Sides,” in *Notes from Indian Country Volume I*, 4.

<sup>47</sup> Tim Giago, “Things Are Not Always What They Seem.”

<sup>48</sup> Tim Giago, “Atmosphere of Hysteria,” in *Notes from Indian Country Volume I*, 5.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

In Giago's mind, Native publications like *Akwesasne Notes* that took partisan and one-sided approaches to the conflict were also out of line.<sup>51</sup> Giago later criticized *Notes* and other Red Power newspapers distributed around Pine Ridge by AIM activists for propagandizing, for failing to present the full truth of the situation, and for dividing Pine Ridge in ways that led to uncompromising violence.<sup>52</sup> Giago understood why the occupiers were doing what they were doing and that they were knowingly violating the law to advocate for their cause. Yet Giago believed that failing to report on both sides of the conflict only made things worse and pitted Indians against Indians, placing uncompromising idealism over cooperation and pragmatic solutions to the problems of Pine Ridge.<sup>53</sup>

The political climate in Pine Ridge, however, made it impossible for a tribal newspaper to publish. Wilson's tribal government had produced a short-lived newspaper, which operated as an administration mouthpiece like the early the *Navajo Times*, in the early 1970s.<sup>54</sup> The paper had shut down well before the Wounded Knee occupation.<sup>55</sup> There was no independent newspaper in Pine Ridge, and all of the local mainstream newspapers chose to run Associated Press reports or nothing at all on the Wounded Knee occupation and deadly intertribal conflict that followed.<sup>56</sup> Giago recognized a vacuum in objective and investigative coverage of the issues that were plaguing and dividing his native tribal community.

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<sup>51</sup> Tim Giago, "Media Attempts to Open Old Wounds," in *Notes from Indian Country Volume II*, (Rapid City, SD: Giago Book Publishing, 1999), 5.

<sup>52</sup> Tim Giago, "Media Attempts to Open Old Wounds"

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Giago, "Things Are Not Always What They Seem."

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Carrier "South Dakota Indian Journalist Gave Voices to a People Long Ignored."



## Reporting on Pine Ridge

On his television show, *The First Americans*, Giago made his first attempt to bring both sides of the conflict together.<sup>57</sup> By the time Giago's show was on the airwaves in 1976, however, tensions following Wounded Knee had led to a years-long civil war in Pine Ridge.<sup>58</sup> In the three years after Wounded Knee, 60 Indians and two FBI agents died in violence that erupted between Wilson supporters and opponents, including AIM activists who were not all Pine Ridge citizens.<sup>59</sup> Giago brought guests from both the pro-Wilson and anti-Wilson camps into his studio to voice their perspectives.<sup>60</sup> The show featured interviews with leaders on both sides, including AIM leader Russell Means and Chairman Dick Wilson.<sup>61</sup> Giago tried to glean where the opposing sides agreed and disagreed and to find common ground by discussing how each intended to improve conditions in Pine Ridge.<sup>62</sup> For an hour, once every two weeks, Giago had a place from which he could bring attention to the violence on the reservation and try to heal wounds.<sup>63</sup> But to truly unify and bring information to his people, Giago would need a larger platform, and one that Pine Ridge citizens could access more often.

Giago found that opportunity when Jim Carrier, editor of the *Rapid City Journal*, decided to hire him to write a weekly column in the newspaper reporting on news and life from "the Indian perspective."<sup>64</sup> In his weekly column "Notes from Indian Country," Giago tackled a wide range of Indian issues such as negative coverage of Indians in

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<sup>57</sup> Giago, "Things Are Not Always What They Seem."

<sup>58</sup> Carrier, "South Dakota Indian Journalist Gave Voices to a People Long Ignored."

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Giago, "Things Are Not Always What They Seem."

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> "Tim Giago Biography," *Huffington Post*.

<sup>64</sup> Carrier, "South Dakota Indian Journalist Gave Voices to a People Long Ignored."

mainstream culture and media, tribal laws and government, athletics on reservations, and tribal education.<sup>65</sup> Giago later said his intention for writing his columns was “to take on the closed media in South Dakota...and cause them to open their news pages to more positive news concerning Native Americans in their state.”<sup>66</sup> For many white readers, Giago’s column was their only window into Indian Country.<sup>67</sup> For Indian readers, the column was the first time they recognized authentic depictions of themselves in a local newspaper.<sup>68</sup>

After a year of publishing the column, in 1980, the *Journal* hired Giago as a full-time reporter.<sup>69</sup> Giago initially hoped that this position would allow him to delve deep into coverage of Pine Ridge and other nearby Indian communities.<sup>70</sup> But unfortunately that was not the case. Giago quickly grew frustrated with a front office attitude that ignored pressing Indian stories and did not allow him to effectively cover stories. One day, an editor told Giago that he did not think Giago was capable of objectively reporting on Indian issues and stories because he was a Native American.<sup>71</sup> Giago angrily replied, “All of your other reporters are white. Are they objective in covering the white community?”<sup>72</sup>

By the spring of 1981, Giago had reached the point where he knew that he would not be able to do what he wanted within the restrictive confines of the *Journal*.<sup>73</sup> Giago

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<sup>65</sup> Tim Giago, “Table of Contents,” in *Notes from Indian Country Volume I*.

<sup>66</sup> Tim Giago, “Signing Off After More Than 30 Tears,” *Huffington Post*, February 10, 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tim-giago/signing-off-after-more-th\\_b\\_2657969.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tim-giago/signing-off-after-more-th_b_2657969.html).

<sup>67</sup> Carrier, “South Dakota Indian Journalist Gave Voices to a People Long Ignored.”

<sup>68</sup> Carrier, “South Dakota Indian Journalist Gave Voices to a People Long Ignored.”

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> Giago, “Freedom of the Press in Indian Country.”

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

resigned from his job as a reporter and moved back to Pine Ridge to start a community newspaper for the reservation. He would call it the *Lakota Times*—in homage to the *Navajo Times*—in hopes of making it something that would unite and inform all Lakotas on the reservation.<sup>74</sup> Giago would continue to contribute his “Notes from Indian Country” column to the *Journal* and a few other South Dakota papers that had begun reprinting it.<sup>75</sup> But Giago’s main focus would be on creating a medium that could truly represent and speak for the interests of all the people of Pine Ridge.

### **Starting the *Lakota Times***

With nothing but a vision for an independent Indian newspaper, Giago and his wife Doris opened up an office for the *Lakota Times* in an abandoned beauty parlor on Main Street in Pine Ridge Village, the center of the 5,000 square mile reservation.<sup>76</sup> Giago’s former classmate and friend from Holy Rosary Melvin “Dickie” Brewer let Giago use his vintage 1946 Plymouth for collateral to secure a 4,000 dollar loan to pay the operating expenses for the newspaper’s first few issues.<sup>77</sup> Brewer also agreed to take on the role of advertising manager and combine his knowledge of the local area with Giago’s business skills to entice local businesses to advertise in the newspaper.<sup>78</sup> He also hired a few Lakota reporters to write stories with the promise that salaries would come

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<sup>74</sup> Giago, “New Venture,” in *Notes from Indian Country Volume I*, 10.

<sup>75</sup> Carrier, “South Dakota Indian Journalist Gave Voices to a People Long Ignored.”

<sup>76</sup> Giago, “Freedom of the Press in Indian Country.”

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

once the paper began to hit the newsstands.<sup>79</sup> With a small staff in place, Giago began work on the first issue of the paper.

On the editorial page of the first issue, Giago promised to “Report the news accurately, giving both sides of an issue” (Figure 2).<sup>80</sup> The goal in the *Lakota Times* would be to represent all the people in the reservation community, to report the facts of events and controversial topics, and to advocate for the best interests of the Lakota people.<sup>81</sup>

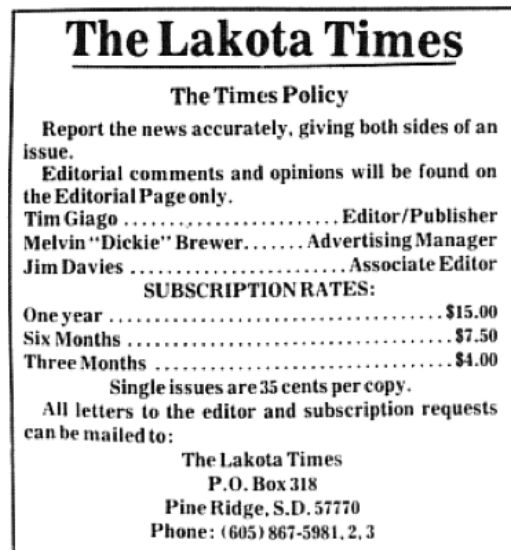


Fig. 2: Staff box in the first issue of the *Lakota Times*’ showing the policy: “Report the news accurately, giving both sides of an issue”<sup>82</sup>

Giago had learned many lessons by reading and seeing how the mainstream media incorrectly covered Indian Country. He consciously incorporated these lessons into the way he planned to operate his newspaper. Giago devoted his “Notes from Indian Country” column for the first issue to addressing past poor media coverage of Indians and

<sup>79</sup> Giago, “Freedom of the Press in Indian Country.”

<sup>80</sup> “Staff Box,” *Lakota Times*, July 9, 1981, 3.

<sup>81</sup> Giago, “Our First Edition of the Lakota Times.”

<sup>82</sup> “Staff Box.”

what the *Lakota Times* would do to try to present a more accurate picture of reservation life.<sup>83</sup> “Inaccurate, erroneous and degrading stories about Indian people are a reflection of a general attitude of ignorance,” Giago wrote.<sup>84</sup> Instead of only reporting isolated stories of drunkenness, violence, and desperation, Giago wished that the media could capture a more accurate reflection of Indians. Giago wrote:

Every journalist should use one basic rule when writing about Indian people. You are dealing with human beings. We live in houses, drive cars, send our children to school, attend church services, fall in love, weep at funerals, laugh at jokes, cheer at basketball games, watch television, read books and newspapers. In short, we have feelings.<sup>85</sup>

Giago hoped that his newspaper’s coverage of the people of Pine Ridge might act as a corrective to the negative stereotypes that the outside world had of Indians and provide Indians with positive and accurate pictures of themselves.

Giago had also observed the operations of other tribal and Native newspapers, like the *Navajo Times*, *Akwesasne Notes*, and *Wassaja* and hoped to take good ideas from each and correct for some of those papers’ limitations.<sup>86</sup> From the *Navajo Times*, Giago took the inspiration to create a newspaper that could be capable of covering the news and representing a people of a large and diverse tribal nation.<sup>87</sup> By making his newspaper financially independent from the Pine Ridge tribal government, however, Giago hoped to be able to operate a free press and keep a critical eye on the tribal government.<sup>88</sup> From *Akwesasne Notes*, Giago wanted to borrow the same spirit of fierce advocacy for Indian

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<sup>83</sup> Tim Giago, “Notes from Indian Country,” *Lakota Times*, July 9, 1981, 3.

<sup>84</sup> Giago, “Notes from Indian Country,” *Lakota Times*, July 9, 1981, 3.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

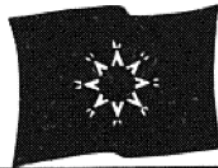
<sup>86</sup> Giago, “Freedom of the Press in Indian Country.”

<sup>87</sup> Tim Giago, “Reservation Papers,” in *Notes from Indian Country Volume I*, 10.

<sup>88</sup> Giago, “New Venture.”

people.<sup>89</sup> Nevertheless, Giago wanted to keep his editorial comments and personal opinions confined to the editorial page only.<sup>90</sup> He hoped to present multiple perspectives and objective reporting to coverage of stories rather than get embedded or too sympathetic with any movements. Giago looked to his mentor Rupert Costo's *Wassaja* as an example of how to stand up for Indian rights and get the attention of white audiences and Washington power brokers.<sup>91</sup> But by locating the *Lakota Times* in the middle of a reservation community rather than in urban San Francisco, Giago hoped that his paper would be less removed than *Wassaja* from the daily experience of Indian communities.<sup>92</sup>

## **“Serving the Lakota Nation.”**



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Fig. 3: The Oglala Lakota flag on the *Lakota Times* masthead<sup>93</sup>

By initially focusing on one reservation and one Indian nation rather than all of Indian Country, Giago also thought he could build a community around the newspaper. In fact, not just a community, a nation. The original masthead of the *Lakota Times* read: “Serving the Lakota Nation.”<sup>94</sup> Giago wanted the Oglalas of Pine Ridge to unify and once again sense that they were part of a nation. The masthead also included an image of the Oglala Lakota flag (Figure 3). The Oglala Sioux Tribal Council in Pine Ridge had approved the symbolic flag in 1962, during the termination era, in an attempt to unify all

<sup>89</sup> Tim Giago, “Right to Express,” in *Notes from Indian Country Volume I*, 19.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Giago, “Walking Away from the Editor’s Desk.”

<sup>92</sup> Giago, “Reservation Papers.”

<sup>93</sup> “Masthead,” *Lakota Times*, July 9, 1981, 1.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

the Lakotas in Pine Ridge.<sup>95</sup> The flag has eight teepees—which represent the eight districts of the reservation—arranged in a *hocoka*, or peaceful camp circle.<sup>96</sup> Giago used the flag because it represented the Lakota Nation he hoped for, one that unified its various factions to work together to promote prosperity in Pine Ridge.

### **A Community Newspaper**

To make the *Lakota Times* a central part of the Pine Ridge community, the newspaper covered stories and profiled people from all over the reservation. Many of the topics would seem rather ordinary to typical community newspaper readers. Sports teams from high schools on and around the reservation got ample coverage.<sup>97</sup> Announcements about Pine Ridge residents from heartfelt obituaries to wedding announcements ran in the middle of issues.<sup>98</sup> Summaries of local government meetings and decisions filled much of the copy.<sup>99</sup> Schedules of upcoming community events and meetings filled up weekly calendars.<sup>100</sup> This would all seem normal in a small town or suburban newspaper anywhere in the United States.<sup>101</sup> But it was not normal in Pine Ridge. For a reservation community that either saw negative coverage or no coverage in the media, this coverage of seemingly innocuous positive news was a sea change. Jim Carrier, the editor of the *Rapid City Journal*, later wrote, “People stood in line and snatched papers from carriers’

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<sup>95</sup> “History of the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation,” *Oglala Lakota Nation*, Accessed April 1, 2013, <http://www.oglalalakotanation.org/oln/History.html>.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> “Sports...Rosebud Invades Pine Ridge,” *Lakota Times*, July 16, 1981, 6.

<sup>98</sup> “Community Announcements,” *Lakota Times*, July 16, 1981, 8.

<sup>99</sup> “O.S.T. Housing Authority Begins Legal Proceedings,” *Lakota Times*, July 30, 1981, 1.

<sup>100</sup> “Schedule,” *Lakota Times*, July 16, 1981,

<sup>101</sup> John L. Sim, *The Grass Roots Press: America's Communities Newspapers*, (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1969), 48.

hands just to read about—themselves! For once, there was something about Indians in a newspaper beyond drunks and welfare and violence.”<sup>102</sup>

In addition to news about daily life on the reservation, the *Lakota Times* also regularly ran content that showed the deep historical roots of the Pine Ridge community. The *Times* often ran old pictures of Lakotas, found in archives, asking readers to write in to identify any people they recognized and tell any interesting stories about them. In a regular feature, “Lakota’s of Yesteryear,” the paper ran profiles of Lakota men and women.<sup>103</sup> Some were well known heroes like Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull.<sup>104</sup> But most were ordinary people, like Jake Herman, a man who had worked as a rodeo clown in tribal rodeos and was known for his sense of humor.<sup>105</sup> These profiles gave readers a sense that their community on the reservation had people they could identify and sympathize with dating back for decades. For ordinary citizens who saw people they knew profiled, the section likely made them think that the *Lakota Times* cared about people in their local community.

The *Lakota Times* made a special effort to reach out and appeal to the youngest members of the Pine Ridge community. In each issue, the *Times* ran a one-page section called “Takoja Times—The Grandchildren’s Page” (Figure 4).<sup>106</sup> The page ran a variety of content to catch the eyes of Lakota youths. There was also information about schools on the reservation and upcoming events geared toward children.<sup>107</sup> Sometimes the page featured word games with themes about life in Pine Ridge or coloring pages of historical

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<sup>102</sup> Carrier, “South Dakota Indian Journalist Gave Voices to a People Long Ignored.”

<sup>103</sup> “Lakota’s of Yesteryear,” *Lakota Times*, July 9, 1981, 8.

<sup>104</sup> “Lakota’s of Yesteryear,” *Lakota Times*, July 30, 1981, 8.

<sup>105</sup> “Lakota’s of Yesteryear,” *Lakota Times*, July 9, 1981, 8.

<sup>106</sup> “Takoja Times: The Grandchildren’s Page,” *Lakota Times*, July 9, 1981, 7.

<sup>107</sup> “History of the Red Shirt Table School,” *Lakota Times*, August 27, 1981, 5.



Lakota figures.<sup>108</sup> Other times, the page printed content by children, such as poetry, artwork, and photography.<sup>109</sup> By including children in the newspaper, Giago hoped to teach them early on that they were an integral part of their community.



Fig. 4: Takoja Times, the children's section of the *Lakota Times*<sup>110</sup>

The most important way *Lakota Times* enmeshed itself in the Pine Ridge community had nothing to do with the written content in the newspaper. Nearly half of the space on some pages of the paper comprised advertisements from local stores and

<sup>108</sup> "Takoja Times," *Lakota Times*, October 29, 1981, 6.

<sup>109</sup> "Takoja Times," *Lakota Times*, July 9, 1981, 6.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

merchants.<sup>111</sup> Ads also came from local Indian high schools, colleges, tribal governments, and reservation programs.<sup>112</sup> Advertising revenue was important to keep the newspaper afloat and independent from the tribal government.<sup>113</sup> Yet the ads also promoted Indian-owned and Indian-friendly businesses and demonstrated that those establishments were investing in the idea of an independent newspaper for the Lakota community.



Fig. 5: An advertisement that appeared in the first issue of the *Lakota Times*<sup>114</sup>

By the end of the first year of publishing, the *Lakota Times* had brought in over \$60,000 in advertising revenues.<sup>115</sup> This was enough money to keep the publication in print and enough to demonstrate the support and attention the newspaper was receiving in the local area.

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<sup>111</sup> Giago, "Freedom of the Press in Indian Country."

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Giago, "Some Self Supporting," in *Notes from Indian Country Volume I*, 7.

<sup>114</sup> "Sioux Nation Shopping Center Advertisement," *Lakota Times*, July 9, 1981, 8.

<sup>115</sup> Giago, "Freedom of the Press in Indian Country."

### Critical Coverage of All Sides

Not all of the content in the *Lakota Times* was positive, however. The *Lakota Times* was successful first and foremost because of its ability to cover the types of controversial stories and events that no previous newspaper in the area had either covered or covered fairly. From federal government and tribal government actions to local businesses and organizations, nobody was safe from the eyes of *Lakota Times* reporters or from Giago's strong-worded editorials. The paper did not shy away from controversial topics and always tried to present the full truth from many angles, even if the result was not always pretty.

When covering protest events, the *Times* gathered perspectives from sources within protest movements, from government or business establishment sources who were opposed, and from general public observers.<sup>116</sup> When a tribal government official did something wrong or made a controversial decision, the *Times* would print the full story and examine the possible ramifications.<sup>117</sup> The *Times* also reported when the local or federal government enacted harmful policies or whenever an area business discriminated against Indians.

Within the first months of publishing, the *Times* staff confronted two stories that would test how objective and fair they would be. As the first issue of the *Times* neared production, a group of protestors set up an encampment at Wind Cave National Park, a sacred place for the Lakota in the Black Hills that was no longer owned by the tribe, to protest for indigenous religion.<sup>118</sup> The federal government and many tribal leaders

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<sup>116</sup> "Tribal Attorney Opposes Occupation," *Lakota Times*, July 9, 1981, 1.

<sup>117</sup> "Looking Elk Impeachment Attempt Fails," *Lakota Times*, August 6, 1981, 1.

<sup>118</sup> "Tribal Attorney Opposes Occupation."

opposed the occupation, labeling it as an extreme and illegal action and criticizing the occupiers for broadening the politics of the protest to issues beyond religion.<sup>119</sup> But many Pine Ridge residents looked to the occupation for inspiration and agreed with its aims.<sup>120</sup> The *Lakota Times* reported on the occupation in the first issue with a series of long front-page investigative reports that objectively reported on the facts of the occupation and comments from people with differing viewpoints.<sup>121</sup>

The impeachment proceedings for Oglala Tribal President Stanley Looking Elk proved another sensitive subject that the papers coverage carefully navigated.<sup>122</sup> Looking Horse's impeachment had less to do with anything he had done wrong than with a power struggle between the competing factions in the tribe that still lingered from the Wounded Knee era.<sup>123</sup> The *Times* covered the proceedings carefully, trying to give each side equal space in reports.<sup>124</sup> Factual reports were supplemented by editorials calling for peace, unity, and mutual understanding between sides.<sup>125</sup> This type of multi-sided coverage had not been around in Pine Ridge during the more violent fighting between factions in the 1970s.<sup>126</sup> It is quite possible that the *Lakota Times* helped calm tensions by printing the perspectives of all sides during these events instead of one-sided partisan and polarizing accounts.

The pivotal test for the *Times*' objectivity came during the tribal presidential election in March 1982. Different factions in the tribe ran candidates for the tribal

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<sup>119</sup> "Tribal Attorney Opposes Occupation."

<sup>120</sup> "Is the Wind Camp Encampment for Religious Purposes Only?," *Lakota Times*, August 13, 1981.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> "Looking Elk Impeachment Fails."

<sup>123</sup> "Looking Elk Impeachment Fails."

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>125</sup> "Editorial," *Lakota Times*, September 10, 1981, 3.

<sup>126</sup> Tim Giago, "A Native Newspaper Was Born July 1, 1981," *Indianz.com*, June 28, 2010, <http://www.indianz.com/News/2010/020467.asp>.

presidency.<sup>127</sup> Dick Wilson, the polarizing former tribal chairman campaigned for the position.<sup>128</sup> The sitting vice president of the tribe, Joe American Horse was the other main candidate.<sup>129</sup> The men had been political rivals over the previous decade.<sup>130</sup> Giago knew that his paper would have to be careful to remain neutral in the election and allow all candidates to have their voices heard in the pages of the *Lakota Times*.<sup>131</sup> The paper decided to provide the opportunity to any viable candidate to publish his or her initial announcement on entering the race on the front page.<sup>132</sup> The *Times* also gave each candidate space to advertise in the paper and make direct cases to the people of Pine Ridge for their votes.<sup>133</sup> The only editorial stance the paper took in the election was to tell tribal citizens to vote and to tell all candidates to promote tribal unity and cooperation.<sup>134</sup> By the time of the election, the candidates had publicly debated their platforms civilly in print instead through violence. When American Horse won the election, the *Times* reported a relatively high turnout of voters, no violence, and conciliatory interactions between Wilson and American Horse.<sup>135</sup> In what could have been a divisive battle, the *Times*' coverage aided a smooth and democratic election.

On the editorial page of the paper, Giago regularly supplemented the *Times*' objective news reports with biting commentary on all issues affecting Pine Ridge in editorials and his "Notes from Indian Country" column. Giago took full advantage of his

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<sup>127</sup> "Announcements for Candidates," *Lakota Times*, November 19, 1981, 1.

<sup>128</sup> "Wilson Announces His Candidacy for Presidency of the Oglala Sioux Tribe," *Lakota Times*, November 19, 1981, 1.

<sup>129</sup> "American Horse Sweeps General Election," *Lakota Times*, March 18, 1982, 1

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> "Announcements for Candidates."

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> "Announcements for Candidates."

<sup>134</sup> "Exercising Your Right to Vote," *Lakota Times*, February 11, 1982, 3.

<sup>135</sup> "American Horse Sweeps General Election."

paper's independence to criticize and question everything and everybody around him.<sup>136</sup>

Nobody was safe from the wrath Giago's typewriter. He criticized the American Indian Movement for using violent protest tactics and being a divisive force on the reservation.<sup>137</sup> When he thought tribal or federal government leaders were not being transparent or acting in the best interests of the tribe, Giago called them out.<sup>138</sup> He also continued his crusade against South Dakota's mainstream media for its ignorant coverage of Indians.<sup>139</sup> Giago took on controversial issues and powerful interests and aggressively advocated for the interests of his people.

Alongside written opinion articles, Giago ran political cartoons by Tom Little Moon that poked fun at controversial issues and leaders (Figures 6 & 7).<sup>140</sup> The images covered the same wide range of topics as Giago's editorials and columns. But the visceral impact of an unflattering or satirical image, however, could deliver a punch that no written column could.

Overall, the editorial content in the *Times* provoked Pine Ridge readers into thinking about issues that affected their lives and told political leaders and influential Indian organizations that Giago and his newspaper were keeping a critical eye on their actions. None of them would escape his notice.

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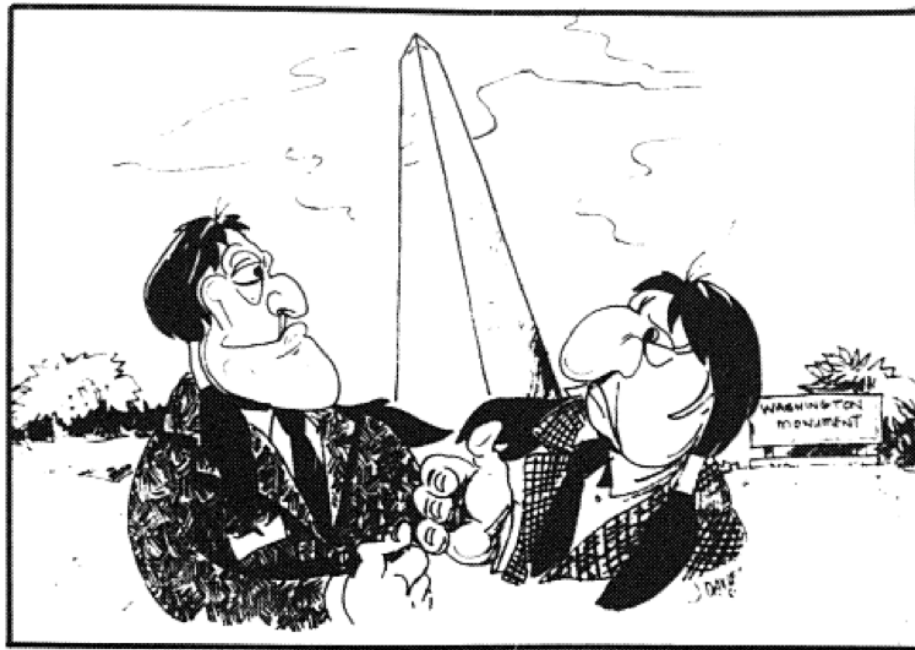
<sup>136</sup> Giago, "Freedom of the Press in Indian Country."

<sup>137</sup> Tim Giago, "Freedom of the Press," *Lakota Times*, October 28, 1982, 3.

<sup>138</sup> Tim Giago, "Impossible to Please Everyone," July 23, 1981, 3.

<sup>139</sup> Tim Giago, "Living in 'Never-Never Land,'" *Lakota Times*, May 28, 1982, 3.

<sup>140</sup> Tom Little Moon, "Political Cartoons," *Lakota Times*, October 15, 1981 and November 5, 1981, 3.



"This man Reagan said he is going to re-dedicate this monument to the American Indian. He is going to call it the Great White Shaft!!!

Fig. 6: A political cartoon poking fun at President Reagan for poor handling of Indian affairs<sup>141</sup>



"We had to lay-off about eight tribal employees in order to have enough money to make it here, but, by golly, we sure have to make sacrifices to fight for Indian rights!"

Fig. 7: Political cartoon criticizing attendees of the National Congress of American Indians<sup>142</sup>

<sup>141</sup> Tom Little Moon, "Political Cartoon," *Lakota Times*, October 15, 1981, 3.

<sup>142</sup> Tom Little Moon, "Political Cartoon," *Lakota Times*, November 5, 1981, 3.

## Impact and Backlash

Critically covering the news in a place that had long been ignored by journalists provoked both positive and negative reactions. The “Letters to the Editor” sections of each issue showed a diversity of readers responding to articles in the *Times*.<sup>143</sup> Most writers were Lakotas from reservation towns in Pine Ridge, but others were Indians from other reservations in Indian Country and whites from cities across the Great Plains.<sup>144</sup> Ordinary people in the Pine Ridge community and beyond were reading and engaging with the *Lakota Times*.

Just as important was the evidence that powerful interests were paying attention to the *Times*. After just the first issue, the Pine Ridge tribal government showed that it was reading articles. After reading stories about the Wind Cave Occupation and President Looking Elk’s impeachment proceedings, Tribal Attorney Tony Fast Horse called Giago twice with “veiled threats” to shut down the paper if Giago did not stop making the tribal government look bad.<sup>145</sup> Of course, as an independent newspaper, the *Lakota Times* had no obligation to follow the orders of tribal government officials. Giago responded to Fast Horse in an editorial, saying: “We will not knuckle under to the likes of Tony Fast Horse or anyone else who would attempt to intimidate or block us from reporting the news as we see it. Thank God for freedom of the press and free enterprise.”<sup>146</sup> As long as the *Times* stayed independent from the tribal government, the paper would not shy away from criticism and would not cower from heavy-handed threats.

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<sup>143</sup> “Letters to the Editor,” *Lakota Times*, June 10, 1982, 3.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Giago, “Impossible to Please Everyone.”

<sup>146</sup> Giago, “Impossible to Please Everyone.”



The *Times* also caught the notice of state and federal government officials. Learning from the Costos' efforts at *Wassaja* to draw the attention of Washington, Giago knew that the *Times* would need to take on powerful political players. In early issues, officials from local Bureau of Indian Affairs agencies started writing letters to the paper and agreeing to interviews for stories.<sup>147</sup> U.S. Senators from South Dakota followed soon afterward with detailed answers to the *Times*' questions and with responses to stories that criticized Washington's handling of Indian affairs.<sup>148</sup> Early on, the *Times* was especially good at provoking the state government of South Dakota. In 1982, Governor William Janklow sent Giago a long letter in response to an opinion column that had called whites in the state racists.<sup>149</sup> In the letter, Governor Janklow expressed disagreement with Giago's accusations and discussed ways that the state was working to bring more mutual understanding and peace between whites and Indians.<sup>150</sup> That the governor spent the time to publicly respond to Giago's column showed that he was heeding what the *Lakota Times* was printing.

Others who disagreed with coverage or editorials were not so civil as to send in letters. In October 1982, a week after the *Times* printed an article examining the influence of the American Indian Movement (AIM) on the reservation community, two young men drove up to the *Lakota Times*' office and hurled four firebombs against the wall and windows of the building.<sup>151</sup> Luckily some Pine Ridge police officers hearing the initial

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<sup>147</sup> Manuel Moran, "Update on Indian Education," *Lakota Times*, July 16, 1981, 3.

<sup>148</sup> Larry Pressler, "The Senator Writes," *Lakota Times*, August 19, 1981, 3.

<sup>149</sup> Bill Janklow, "A Letter from the Governor," *Lakota Times*, June 10, 1982, 3.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Robin Gerry, "Terrorists Firebomb Lakota Times," *Lakota Times*, October 21, 1982, 1.

explosions rushed to the scene quickly to put out fires and save the building from extensive damage.<sup>152</sup>



Fig. 8: Cover of *Lakota Times* in the issue after the newspaper's office was firebombed<sup>153</sup>

If the bombers had hoped to stifle the *Lakota Times* or frighten its editor, their plan backfired on both accounts. The bombing only made the Pine Ridge community rally around the newspaper more and made Giago and his staff more resolute to keep striving for freedom of the press on the reservation.<sup>154</sup> In a furious editorial, Giago vowed to readers that the newspaper would “never bow our heads to acts of terrorism or intimidation.”<sup>155</sup> Giago reminded AIM activists that they were always welcome to

<sup>152</sup> Robin Gerry, “Terrorists Firebomb Lakota Times.”

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Tim Giago, “Freedom of the Press,” *Lakota Times*, October 28, 1982, 4.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

contribute to the newspaper, and that his paper would keep trying to cover their organization and events fairly.<sup>156</sup> But Giago warned all who threatened to stop his newspaper from printing that their efforts would never work. He wrote: “We are entitled to freedom of the press just like any newspaper in this great country. We will continue to speak out against injustice against the Lakota people and condemn those who would bring shame and dishonor to the Lakota people.”<sup>157</sup>

After the firebombing, the *Times* had become an integral part of the Pine Ridge community, and there was no way the people would allow it to die. In late 1982, during a special session of the Oglala Tribal Council, Tribal President Joe American Horse proclaimed, “from this day forward any attack upon the Lakota Times will be considered an attack upon the government of the Oglala Sioux Tribe.”<sup>158</sup> Even though the paper was not tied to the government at all, American Horse, who had appreciated the *Times*’ fair and balanced election coverage earlier in the year, recognized the essential service the newspaper provided to the tribe. The firebombing, however, would not be the last time that Giago and the *Times* would face threats or violence. By the end of his career, Giago recalled one failed attempt on his life in the newspaper office, three separate occasions of windows being shot out by shotguns, and many death threats.<sup>159</sup> But through it all, the newspaper and its editor persevered and continued to stand up as an exemplar for upholding press freedom in Indian Country.

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<sup>156</sup> Tim Giago, “Freedom of the Press,” *Lakota Times*, October 28, 1982.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Giago, “Freedom of the Press in Indian Country.”

<sup>159</sup> Chasing Hawk, “Tim Giago Retires from the Newsroom.”

## Beyond One Newspaper

It did not take long for the *Lakota Times* and Giago to start receiving recognition and praise from the world beyond Pine Ridge. Readership grew steadily from the thousands to the tens of thousands over the first few years of publication. The newspaper began to circulate in other tribal communities and regions of the country. Giago and his reporters garnered many journalism awards during the newspaper's first couple years for their groundbreaking efforts to bring press freedom and independent journalism to a reservation community. Not satisfied to rest on his laurels, however, Giago decided to use his newspaper's success as a springboard to even larger steps to improve Native journalism and media coverage of Indian issues.

Giago promoted his own work and image as the first means of increasing the mainstream media's coverage to Indian issues was by promoting his own work. As the *Lakota Times* gained more prestige and recognition, so did Giago's weekly "Notes from Indian Country Today" column. In the early 1980s, Knight Ridder—later McClatchy News Service—syndicated the column and began running it regularly in most South Dakota newspapers and in Knight Ridder's larger national newspapers like the *Denver Post* and *Kansas City Star*.<sup>160</sup> Giago also had his column published occasionally in the upstart newspaper *USA Today*, which was founded by South Dakotan newspaperman Allen Neuharth.<sup>161</sup> The column put the "Indian perspective" into newspapers with many readers who had rarely given Indian issues much thought. Giago became a recognizable media figure, making appearances on the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, *NBC News*, and *Nightline* to discuss Native issues.

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<sup>160</sup> Chasing Hawk, "Tim Giago Retires from the Newsroom."

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

Giago could only do so much by himself to advance Native journalism. If Native journalists wanted make significant advances in their own work and mount serious challenges to entrenched negative media attitudes toward Indians, Giago knew they would need to work together and train a new generation of Native investigators, editors, and reporters.<sup>162</sup> Giago therefore founded the Native American Press Association (NAPA).<sup>163</sup> In 1983, Giago sent letters to every Native journalist he knew and Indian newspaper he could find asking if they would be interested in forming a national organization. With the help of Penn State Professor of Journalism Bill Dulaney, Giago set up the organization's first NAPA conference on the Penn State campus in 1984.<sup>164</sup> About two dozen journalists from a diverse set of Native newspapers made appearances including Loren Tapahe of the *Navajo Times Today*, Jose Barreiro of *Akwesasne Notes*, and Rupert Costo of *Wassaja*.<sup>165</sup> The attendees elected Giago as the association's first president. Giago served as president for four years and then stayed on as an active leader in the association.<sup>166</sup>

At first, NAPA focused almost exclusively on exchanging ideas about how to run Native publications among the editors and journalists at the association's conferences. The association also began awarding Native newspapers and journalists with annual Wassaja Awards, named in honor of both Carlos Montezuma and Rupert and Jeannette Costo's newspapers and designed to be a Native equivalent to the Pulitzer Prize.<sup>167</sup> But

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<sup>162</sup> Mark Trahant, "American Indians at Press: The Native American Journalists Association," in *American Indians and the Mass Media*, ed. Meta G. Carstarphen and John P. Sanchez, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012), 217.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid, 218.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid, 220.

by the third convention in 1987, the organization changed its name to the Native American Journalists Association (NAJA) and broadened its mission to include recruiting and training a new generation of young Native journalists, to strengthen Native publications and fill positions in the mainstream media, and to educate the mainstream media about how to best cover Indian Country.<sup>168</sup> Over time the size of NAJA grew from the original two dozen to hundreds of members. More and more young Native journalists attended annual conferences each year, participated in training workshops, networked with media members, and found jobs in both the Native and mainstream press.<sup>169</sup>

Beginning in the late 1980s, NAJA published books and pamphlets on Native journalism including *From the Front Lines*, a collection of essays by Native journalists about challenges in freedom of the press in Indian Country, and *100 Questions, 500 Nations: A Reporter's Guide to Native America*, a digest of information designed to help mainstream journalists who were unfamiliar with Native issues.<sup>170</sup> One such publication, *The American Indian and the Media*, which Giago edited in 1991, offered helpful essays like a basic overview of recent American Indian history, advice from a non-Indian reporter who had covered an Indian beat for his newspaper, a review of important modern issues facing Indians, and an overview of negative media stereotypes.<sup>171</sup> In the introduction to the book, Giago offered a few pages of advice to reporters like keeping in mind the diversity of Indian Country, reminding reporters to check their facts with

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<sup>168</sup> Trahant, "American Indians at Press: The Native American Journalists Association," 218.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid, 218.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid, 219.

<sup>171</sup> Tim Giago, ed., *The American Indian and the Media*, (Minneapolis: The National Conference of Christians and Jews, Inc., 1991), vii.

multiple sources rather than rely on single “Indian experts.” He also encouraged journalists not get too caught up reporting on obvious negative details.<sup>172</sup>

Giago’s main advice was: “We are a people who believe in our own sovereignty. We believe we can progress with the rest of America without losing our spirituality, culture, or traditions. Knowing these things, you will be able to approach a news story with more objectivity and a clearer understanding of Native America.”<sup>173</sup> In this statement, Giago synthesized many of the issues his predecessors had wrestled with in representing Indians in the media—indigeneity versus modernity, cultural and political sovereignty versus assimilation—and communicated these themes to journalists who likely had never even considered them when covering Indian Country. Thus, his efforts to spread his column to mainstream newspapers and support Native journalists through NAJA, Giago had effectively worked to replicate the local successes he had with the *Lakota Times* and advance Native journalism as a profession and promote more Native voices in the mainstream media.

### ***Indian Country Today***

As Giago’s prominence increased on the national stage, it only made sense that his small reservation newspaper also grew in scale and scope. From the first issues of the *Lakota Times*, Giago had always had his eyes on Indian communities beyond Pine Ridge. The first issues carried a regular feature called “News from Other Reservations,” which looked at other South Dakota tribal communities and later to other parts of Indian

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<sup>172</sup> Giago, *The American Indian and the Media*, 5.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

Country as far away as New Mexico, New York, and Alaska.<sup>174</sup> Gradually over the first few years of publishing, the *Lakota Times* began to also cover news and events more extensively on reservations and Indian communities across South Dakota, and then across the Great Plains and beyond.<sup>175</sup> Giago said that during this expansion that he still wanted his newspaper to viewed as a “community newspaper.”<sup>176</sup> No matter how far the newspaper grew its reach, Giago wanted readers across Indian Country to feel like they were part of the same Indian community. “We were Indian,” Giago said, “and we thought as Indians, and our newspaper reflected that concept.”<sup>177</sup>



Fig. 9: Giago's introduction to *Indian Country Today*<sup>178</sup>

On Columbus Day 1992—500 years after 1492—Giago renamed his newspaper *Indian Country Today* and said that his publication would become “a newspaper that

<sup>174</sup> “News from Other Reservations,” *Lakota Times*, July 16, 1981, 2.

<sup>175</sup> Giago, “Freedom of the Press in Indian Country.”

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Tim Giago, “Welcome to Indian Country Today,” *Indian Country Today*, October 8, 1992, A4



would bring the Indian Nations of America closer together through a common vehicle of communications.”<sup>179</sup> The newspaper would have regional editions that designed to act as community newspapers for the tribes in the Great Plains, the Southwest, California, the Southeast, Northwest, Midwest, and Northeast.<sup>180</sup>

The national platform gave the newspaper more prestige and gave Giago even more ability to speak out on Indian issues and force powerful decision makers to listen to him. Investigative reports on scandals and news across all of Indian Country and opinion pages with Giago’s editorials alongside op-eds from other Indian writers with different perspectives grabbed the attention of an increasingly large audience.<sup>181</sup> By the end of the 1990s, the newspaper had readers in all 50 states and in 17 foreign countries.<sup>182</sup> The paper also had the eyes of powerful political interests such as congressional offices, state legislators, and the White House; all subscribed to the newspaper.<sup>183</sup> *Indian Country Today* succeeded in playing the same game that *Wassaja* had in the 1970s. *ICT* spoke on a national platform that appealed to powerful listeners on behalf of Indian Country and pushed Indian issues into public discourse and the political process. The pages of *Indian Country Today* were the first to bring forward important issues such as the use of racist Native American sports mascots.<sup>184</sup> The paper also published policy debates on important issues such as Indian gaming and casinos and the limits of tribal sovereignty.<sup>185</sup> The

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<sup>179</sup> Giago, “Welcome to Indian Country Today.”

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Carrier, “South Dakota Indian Journalist Gave Voices to a People Long Ignored.”

<sup>182</sup> Giago, “Freedom of the Press in Indian Country.”

<sup>183</sup> Giago, “Freedom of the Press in Indian Country.”

<sup>184</sup> Avis Little Eagle, “Feathers Without Honor: Protesters Challenge Racist Mascot Names,” *Indian Country Today*, November 19, 1992, A1.

<sup>185</sup> “Winner’s Circle: Gaming in Indian Country,” *Indian Country Today*, November 5, 1992, 5.

newspaper became the place politicians and activists turned to for an idea of what were important and pressing in Indian Country.

The original local community feel of the newspaper was lost, however, as the newspaper tried to cover everybody in vast and diverse Indian Country. Giago lamented that as *Indian Country Today* became more national in scope, many of his readers told him that his paper had “lost its Lakota heart.”<sup>186</sup> Since the newspaper had grown so large, there was once again no community newspaper truly covering news and life on the Pine Ridge Reservation. So, in 1998, Giago sold *Indian Country Today*—which was at that point making almost two million dollars in advertising revenue annually—to Four Directions Media, Inc., an Indian-owned enterprise based in the Oneida Nation in New York and started the *Lakota Journal*, a new community newspaper for Pine Ridge.<sup>187</sup>

### Giago’s Legacy

After leaving behind his life’s biggest creation, an influential national Indian publication, Tim Giago returned to his roots. He had initially planned on retiring to typing up his weekly column and writing a detailed book about his experiences in Native journalism. But Giago quickly recognized that many tribes in South Dakota once again lacked an independent local press.<sup>188</sup> Following the sale of *Indian Country Today*, Giago helped found and edit three more local newspapers: the *Lakota Journal*, the *Lakota Country Times*, and the *Native Sun News*.<sup>189</sup> At each of these newspapers, Giago nurtured staffs of young local Native journalists who took over publishing each paper after he

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<sup>186</sup> Giago, “Freedom of the Press in Indian Country.”

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> Carrier, “South Dakota Indian Journalist Gave Voices to a People Long Ignored.”

<sup>189</sup> Chasing Hawk, “Tim Giago Retires from the Newsroom.”

left.<sup>190</sup> Giago retired from his final newsroom in 2011. He wrote his final “Notes from Indian Today” column in February 2013, and promised to start writing a book on his experiences in Native journalism.<sup>191</sup>

Over the course of Giago’s career, the landscape of Native journalism had seen dramatic improvements. At the time of his retirement, the enduring legacy of Giago and his predecessors’ efforts to advance the state of American Indian journalism had resulted in significant gains and successes. Mark Trahant, the former editor of the *Navajo Times*, who later served a term as president of NAJA and worked as an editor in two major mainstream daily newspapers, wrote in 2012: “Now, Native American journalists are working everywhere, including for their tribal radio stations and newspapers, or for a television station in large-market media areas like Phoenix or Oklahoma City. Native journalists have found new roles as storytellers for tribal and community enterprises as well as in mainstream media.”<sup>192</sup>

In his final column, printed in many tribal publications, mainstream newspapers, and posted online on blogs and popular news websites, Giago wrote, “Today, a retiring editor puts his faith in the next generation of editors.”<sup>193</sup> During his career, Giago personally helped spawn the journalism careers of an entire generation of new Native journalists including Avis Little Eagle of the *Teton Times*, Amanda Takes War Bonnet of the *Lakota Country Times*, Konnie LeMay of *Duluth Magazine*, Jerry Reynolds of *Indian Country Today*, and Ernestine Chasing Hawk of *Native Sun News*. Reflecting on his career, Giago wrote, “I have always maintained the courage of my convictions. I have

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<sup>190</sup> Chasing Hawk, “Tim Giago Retires from the Newsroom.”

<sup>191</sup> Giago, “Signing Off After More Than 30 Tears.”

<sup>192</sup> Trahant, “American Indians at Press: The Native American Journalists Association,” 218.

<sup>193</sup> Giago, “Signing Off After More Than 30 Tears.”

written about topics the mainstream media never covers with high hopes of giving them the lead to do so.”<sup>194</sup> The next generation of Native journalists, and the next generation of journalists as a whole, should learn from Giago’s example, and from those of the many other American Indian self-determination journalists who came before them, as they tell new stories from Indian Country.

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<sup>194</sup> Giago, “Signing Off After More Than 30 Tears.”

## Afterword

#IdleNoMore

*“We at Wassaja, whose masthead proclaims ‘Let the People Know,’ truly believe that before this century has ended the Indian people will have created their own system of communications, in both print and broadcast media, bringing together the best of their two worlds. We still believe what the Cherokee Phoenix so proudly announced, that the Phoenix will rise again from the ashes of a social conflagration set by the European invaders. Then we can let the people know.”<sup>1</sup>*

—Jeannette Henry Costo, Editor of *Wassaja* (1978)



Figs. 1 & 2: An online graphic for the Idle No More movement and a 2012 *Indian Country Today* cover for an issue featuring a full-length interview with President Barack Obama.<sup>2</sup>

*“This is for all those who have raised their voices on behalf of American Indian tribal nations’ right to survive and prosper on these American lands. America is Indian Country; the seed is in the memory, the roots are in the land. Our audience—the core intellectual and community oriented tribal networks and peoples and their circles of activist allies in the world—is a most demanding circle, always pressuring us to hold the line on Indian rights. We treasure the challenge.”<sup>3</sup>*

—Tim Johnson & José Barreiro, Editors-in-Chief of *Indian Country Today* (2005)

<sup>1</sup> Jeannette Costo, “Foreward,” in *Let My People Know: American Indian Journalism, 1828-1978*, James E. Murphy and Sharon M. Murphy, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981), xvi.

<sup>2</sup> Dwayne Bird, “Idle No More,” *Global Voices Online*, December 15, 2012, <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2012/12/15/indigenous-idle-no-more-movement-sweeps-canada/>; “Obama Sends a Message,” *Indian Country Today*, October 10, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Tim Johnson and José Barreiro, ed., *America Is Indian Country*, (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 2005), III.

The history of American Indian journalism is still being made. Many of the challenges and issues that Native writers and editors encountered during the self-determination era remain unresolved. Tribal governments still control the newsrooms of many tribal publications and restrict freedom of the press on their reservations.<sup>4</sup> The mainstream media continue to fail at responsibly and accurately covering Indian Country.<sup>5</sup> And the American general public still tends to have inaccurate and stereotypical visions of who American Indians are.<sup>6</sup>

Nonetheless, the contemporary era of Native journalism has the potential to be just as dynamic and significant as the one that came before it. With new online media, social networks, and technology capability, modern Native journalists have more tools at their disposal than previous generations of newspapermen and women could have imagined. The descendents of the newspapers covered in this thesis show that modern journalists have learned valuable lessons and have further honed the craft of covering Indian Country.

### **The Cherokee Phoenix Rises from the Ashes**

The Cherokee Nation revived the oldest American Indian publication in 2002 when the tribal council decided to once again begin publishing the *Cherokee Phoenix*.<sup>7</sup> The tribal government controls the new version of the newspaper, just as it controlled

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<sup>4</sup> Tim Giago, "Freedom of the Press in Indian Country," *Nieman Reports*, Fall 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Ruth Seymour, "Names, Not Nations: Patterned References to Indigenous Americans in the New York Times and Los Angeles Times, 1999-2000," in *American Indians and the Mass Media*, ed. Meta G. Carstarphen and John P. Sanchez (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012), 73.

<sup>6</sup> Teresa Trumbly Lamsam and Dennis McAuliffe, Jr., *Taking the Mystery Out of Native American Coverage*, in *Journalism Across Cultures*, ed. Fritz Cropp, Cynthia M. Frisby, and Dean Mills, (Ames, IA: Iowa State Press, 2003), 131.

<sup>7</sup> Will Chavez, "Cherokee Phoenix First Published 182 Years Ago," *Cherokee Phoenix*, January 18, 2010.

Elias Boudinot's publication back in the 1820s and 1830s.<sup>8</sup> Unlike in Boudinot's era, however, the Cherokee tribal government now recognizes the need for the newspaper to act with editorial independence. Learning from the demise of the first *Phoenix* nearly 200 years ago and from troubles in other tribal publications like the *Navajo Times*, the Cherokee Council passed legislation in the last decade designed to make sure that the new *Cherokee Phoenix*, and any other tribal media operating in the Cherokee Nation, will be allowed to operate a free press and have access to important information.<sup>9</sup>

Check It Out
<p><b>CHEROKEE NATION FREE PRESS PROTECTION AND JOURNALIST SHIELD ACT</b>  <a href="#">Click here</a> to view the Cherokee Nation Free Press Protection and Journalist Shield Act.</p> <p><b>CHEROKEE NATION INDEPENDENT PRESS AMENDMENT ACT OF 2009</b>  <a href="#">Click here</a> to view the Cherokee Nation Independent Press Amendment Act of 2009.</p> <p><b>FREEDOM OF INFORMATION AND RIGHTS OF PRIVACY ACT</b>  <a href="#">Click here</a> to view the Freedom of Information and Rights of Privacy Act of 2001.  <a href="#">Click here</a> to view the Freedom of Information and Rights of Privacy Amendments Act of 2004.  <a href="#">Click here</a> to view the Freedom of Information and Rights of Privacy Amendments Act of 2007.</p> <p><b>CHEROKEE PHOENIX EDITORIAL BOARD ANNUAL MEETING</b>  <a href="#">Click here to view</a> the meeting.</p> <p><b>IMPORTANT ELECTION DATES FOR 2013</b>  <a href="#">Click here to view</a> the Election Commission timeline for 2013.</p>

Fig. 3: Table on the homepage of the *Cherokee Phoenix* website prominently displaying the Cherokee Council's newfound commitment to freedom of the press<sup>10</sup>

On the homepage of the *Cherokee Phoenix* website, the publication proudly displays a table with a list of acts passed by the Tribal Council meant to aid freedom of the press (Figure 3).<sup>11</sup> The recently passed acts promote government transparency, freedom of information, and editorial independence for tribal publications. The Freedom

<sup>8</sup> Chavez, "Cherokee Phoenix First Published 182 Years Ago."

<sup>9</sup> "Check It Out," *Cherokee Phoenix*, Accessed April 21, 2013, <http://www.cherokeephox.org/>.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

of Information and Rights of Privacy Act, first passed in 2001, acts much like sunshine laws in the rest of the United States, allowing journalists and the public to access government meetings and records.<sup>12</sup> The Cherokee Nation Independent Press Amendment Act of 2009 officially split the Editorial Board of the *Phoenix* from the Tribal Council and made it official policy to “ensure the tribal publications have independence to report objectively.”<sup>13</sup> Finally, perhaps most applicable to Elias Boudinot’s story, the Cherokee Nation Free Press Protection and Journalist Shield Act of 2012 provided protection for the rights and liberties of individual journalists reporting in the Cherokee Nation.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Navajo Times Today**

As an independent newspaper, the *Navajo Times* now stands as a shining example for all Indian Country newspapers to follow. In a 2011 interview, Publisher Tom Arviso, Jr. said, “I think the most important contribution that we make is that we really truly are a watchdog of our tribal government.”<sup>15</sup> Investigative reporting on the tribal government’s actions and local businesses’ practices has revealed abuses and brought attention to controversial issues.<sup>16</sup> Critical political cartoons by the *Times*’ staff cartoonist Jack

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<sup>12</sup> “The Freedom of Information and Rights to Privacy Act,” *Cherokee Phoenix*, Accessed April 20, 2013, [http://www.cherokeephoenix.org/Docs/2012/9/6606\\_LA-25-07.PDF](http://www.cherokeephoenix.org/Docs/2012/9/6606_LA-25-07.PDF).

<sup>13</sup> “The Cherokee Nation Independent Press Amendment Act of 2009,” *Cherokee Phoenix*, Accessed April 20, 2013, [http://www.cherokeephoenix.org/Docs/2012/5/6237\\_Cherokee%20Nation%20Independent%20Press%20Amendment%20Act%20of%202009.pdf](http://www.cherokeephoenix.org/Docs/2012/5/6237_Cherokee%20Nation%20Independent%20Press%20Amendment%20Act%20of%202009.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> “Cherokee Nation Free Press Protection and Journalist Shield Act of 2012,” *Cherokee Phoenix*, Accessed April 20, 2013, [http://www.cherokeephoenix.org/Docs/2012/5/6236\\_Free%20Press%20Protection%20and%20Journalist%20Shield%20Act.pdf](http://www.cherokeephoenix.org/Docs/2012/5/6236_Free%20Press%20Protection%20and%20Journalist%20Shield%20Act.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> Tom Arviso, Jr., “The Navajo Times,” Who Needs Newspapers?, accessed January 1, 2013, [http://whoneedsnewspapers.org/np\\_interviews.php?npId=aznt&ivId=aznt01](http://whoneedsnewspapers.org/np_interviews.php?npId=aznt&ivId=aznt01).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.



Ahasteen attack tribal, state, and federal elected officials and question policies and conditions that affect Navajos (Figure 4).<sup>17</sup>

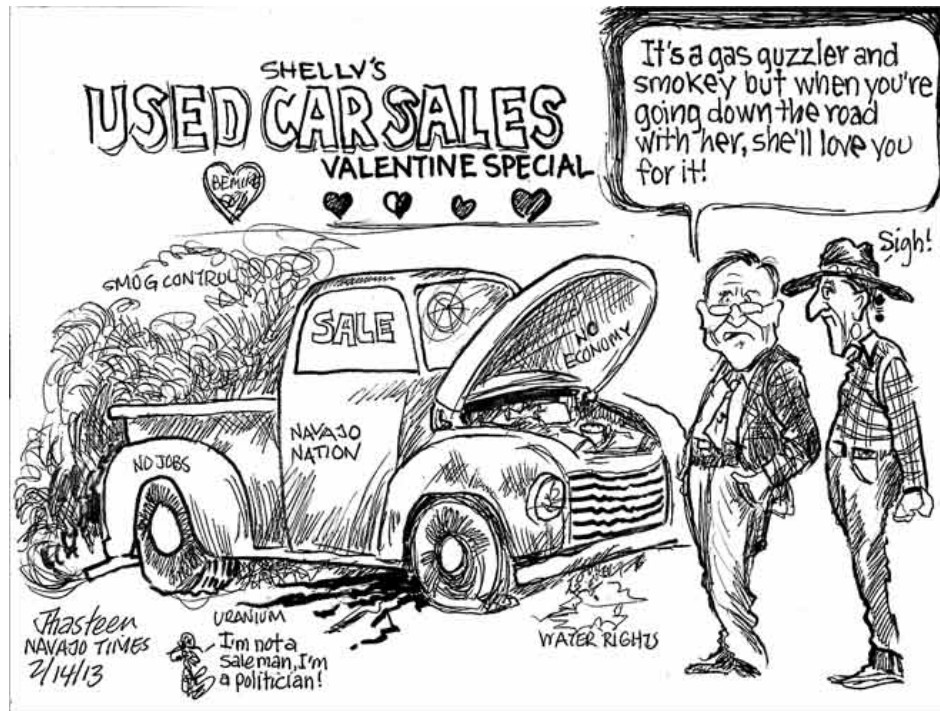


Fig. 3: Political cartoon by *Navajo Times* cartoonist Jack Ahasteen criticizing Navajo Nation President Ben Shelly on his handling of a variety of issues<sup>18</sup>

After all of its struggles to gain editorial and financial independence from the tribal government, the *Navajo Times* has exercised its new freedom of the press to look into all matters affecting the Navajo people. Arviso said his newspaper reports on the good and the bad news in the Navajo Nation.<sup>19</sup> “We present all of these things to our people,” Arviso said, “and we do it in a way that is ethical. It’s fair. It’s balanced. And more than anything, we are able to tell our people the truth.”<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Jack Ahasteen, “2012 with Jack Ahasteen,” *Navajo Times*, December 27, 2012, A6-A7.

<sup>18</sup> Jack Ahasteen, “Shelly’s Used Car Sales,” *Navajo Times*, February 14, 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Tom Arviso, Jr., “The Navajo Times.”

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

## Red Power Revisited

Activist grassroots journalism, like that used by the Red Power movement in *Akwesasne Notes*, is even more possible in the era of the Internet. In December 2012, the Idle No More movement began in Canada after Conservative Party Prime Minister Stephen Harper proposed legislation that mirrored American termination policies from the 1950s in its threats to tribal sovereignty and treaty rights.<sup>21</sup> Grassroots activists in Canada's First Nations, rallied to protest the omnibus bill Bill C-45, using social media websites like Facebook and Twitter to organize events and bring indigenous activists from across the country and world together.<sup>22</sup> By the beginning of 2013, the movement had spread far beyond Canada as massive protests and demonstrations erupted across North America and the world, broadening its mission beyond Canada to many more global indigenous issues.<sup>23</sup>



Fig. 4: Map of Idle No More events across the world through December 27, 2012<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> "Idle No More: Indigenous Brothers and Sisters Taking the Initiative for a Better Tomorrow," *Indian Country Today Media Network*, December 17, 2012, <http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/article/idle-no-more-indigenous-brothers-and-sisters-taking-initiative-better-tomorrow-146378>.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> "Idle No More Gaining Momentum and Forming Plan of Action," *Indian Country Today Media Network*, December 27, 2012, <http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/article/idle-no-more-gaining-momentum-and-forming-plan-action-146581>.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

Using YouTube, Instagram, and blogs, people within the Idle No More movement documented firsthand accounts of demonstrations and published manifestos and demands. Just like in the *Akwesasne Notes*' coverage of the Red Power movement in the 1970s, these accounts of Idle No More are openly partisan and biased in favor of the movement. The material coming from Idle No More activists lacks journalistic professionalism and sometimes fails to tell the full story behind nuanced and complicated issues, espousing idealistic visions rather than pragmatic and politically savvy solutions and strategies to change the Harper government's course of action. Nevertheless, just like *Notes* did, the Idle No More activists have coalesced a strong network and found a way to grab the public's attention and force people to pay attention to indigenous issues.

### **Indian Country Today Media Network**

Over the past decade, *Indian Country Today* emerged even more than before to establish itself as the central forum for indigenous issues and a respected publication that is read by powerful leaders who want to keep up to date on news from Indian Country. After taking over *Indian Country Today*, in hopes of making Tim Giago's newspaper an open forum to multiple viewpoints representative of Indian Country's diversity, Four Directions Media hired two new editors for the publication, Tim Johnson, a moderate conservative Mohawk man who tended to favor tribal governments and pragmatic policies, and José Barreiro, a radical-liberal Taino man who had previously worked for *Akwesasne Notes*.<sup>25</sup> After taking over the newspaper, Johnson said, "*Indian Country Today* portends that American Indians must have an informing, opining, newspaper-

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<sup>25</sup> Tim Johnson and José Barreiro, ed., *America Is Indian Country*, (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 2005), XIV.

driven, media-savvy information network founded upon integrity, intelligence, and respect.”<sup>26</sup> Johnson and Barreiro invited a plethora of Indian intellectuals, writers, activists, and tribal leaders to contribute to the newspaper.<sup>27</sup> During their years running the newspaper, Johnson and Barreiro built on their predecessor’s successes and continued to make the publication the national Indian publication of record.



Fig. 5: Indian Country Today Media Network logo

In 2011, thirty years after Tim Giago started the *Lakota Times*, *Indian Country Today* converted into a full color periodical magazine, redesigned its website, and launched an ambitious online media strategy called the *Indian Country Today Media Network* designed to create “the nations’ first true online community and forum for all of our disparate and common interests.”<sup>28</sup> Under current publisher Ray Halbritter, an Oneida man, the magazine has a wide circulation in all 50 states and across the world.<sup>29</sup> The website currently averages 48,000 unique page views per week.<sup>30</sup>

In 2012, *Indian Country Today* proved its worth through its coverage of important stories. As Idle No More ramped up, *Indian Country Today* covered events across the continent and evaluated the impact of the movement on political decision makers in

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<sup>26</sup> Johnson and Barreiro, XXII.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> “About,” *Indian Country Today Media Network*, Accessed April 15, 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/IndianCountryTodayMediaNetwork/info>.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

Canada and the United States.<sup>31</sup> During the American elections, *Indian Country Today* covered important congressional races and the presidential contest, pressuring candidates to support indigenous rights and tribal sovereignty.<sup>32</sup> Mark Trahan—the former *Navajo Times* editor, NAJA president, and editor of papers like the *Arizona Republic* and *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*—directed *Indian Country Today*’s election coverage and coordinated comprehensive analysis of critical issues.<sup>33</sup> In a sign of the respect afforded to the publication, both President Barack Obama and his challenger Republican Mitt Romney gave full-length interviews to *Indian Country Today*. Both candidates provided detailed and substantive answers to the publication’s questions, demonstrating that candidates for the highest political office in the nation are now engaged in indigenous issues. The small reservation paper started by Tim Giago more than thirty years ago has evolved into a highly visible media force with a significant impact on public discourse on Indian affairs.

### The Next Generation

Where American Indian journalism goes from here depends on the next generation of Native journalists. Of NAJA’s 663 members in 2008, 242 actively worked

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<sup>31</sup> Gyasi Ross, “The Idle No More Movement (or ‘What the Heck Are All These Indians Acting All Indian-ey About?’,” *Indian Country Today Media Network*, January 16, 2013, <http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2013/01/16/idle-no-more-movement-dummies-or-what-heck-are-all-these-indians-acting-all-indian-ey>.

<sup>32</sup> Mark Trahan, “Elections 2012: So the Election Is Over—Now the Politics Are About to Turn Nasty,” *Indian Country Today Media Network*, November 8, 2012, <http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/article/elections-2012-so-the-election-is-over-%25e2%2580%2593now-the-politics-are-about-to-turn-nasty-144663>.

<sup>33</sup> Rob Capriccioso, “President Obama Answers Questions from *Indian Country Today Media Network* in Unprecedented Exchange,” *Indian Country Today Media Network*, October 4, 2012, <http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/article/president-obama-answers-questions-from-indian-country-today-media-network-in-unprecedented-exchange-137584>; Rob Capriccioso, “Mitt Romney Answers Questions from *Indian Country Today Media Network* in Exclusive Exchange,” *Indian Country Today Media Network*, October 10, 2012, <http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/article/mitt-romney-answers-questions-from-indian-country-today-media-network-in-exclusive-exchange-138981>.

for print, online, radio, or television media; 154 were college journalism students; 124 were high school journalism students.<sup>34</sup> Specialized journalism training programs targeted at Native students have sprouted up across the nation. Denny McAuliffe, an Osage man who has been a reporter and assistant editor for the *Washington Post*, directs *reznet.com*, a journalism program at the University of Montana that recruits American Indian students and places them in internships and jobs in mainstream newspapers.<sup>35</sup> *Reznet.com*'s American Indian Journalism Institute, an intensive journalism boot camp for Native college students has placed graduates in positions with the Associate Press, the *New York Times*, and the *Arizona Republic*.<sup>36</sup> Similar programs exist at the University of South Dakota, South Dakota State University, and the University of New Mexico.<sup>37</sup>

As of 2008, American Indian journalists made up between one and two percent of U.S. newsroom staff.<sup>38</sup> Even as newsrooms fired many staff members during the economic downturn, most Native journalists kept their positions.<sup>39</sup> Almost 300 Native journalists currently work as reporters, supervisors, artists, videographers, and online producers in the mainstream news media.<sup>40</sup> Hundreds of tribal newspapers, radio stations, and television networks inform local communities across Indian Country about the news,

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<sup>34</sup> Juan A. Avila Hernandez, "Native Americans in the Twenty-First Century Newsroom: Breaking through Barriers in New Media," in *American Indians and the Mass Media*, ed. Meta G. Carstarphen and John P. Sanchez (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012), 228.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 229.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 227.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Avila Hernandez, 229.

culture, and politics.<sup>41</sup> More young Native journalists are entering mainstream newsrooms, starting blogs, and stepping into roles in tribal media each year.

The diverse and distinct peoples of Indian Country are finally seeing authentic portraits of themselves in the media. There is still much room for Native journalism to grow and plenty of unfinished business left in progressing the state of Indian affairs. But things are looking up in Indian Country. The population of American Indians is increasing at a stunning rate. In 2010, 5.2 million Americans identified as American Indian or Alaska Native either alone or in combination with other races; 2.9 million as American Indian or Alaska Native alone.<sup>42</sup> Between 2000 and 2010, the American Indian population increased by 39 percent, a much faster rate than the general American population, which increased by 9.7 percent.<sup>43</sup> Since the implementation of self-determination policies in the 1970s, Indian tribes and communities have taken control over much of their administrative affairs, from healthcare to education to economic development.<sup>44</sup> Thanks to the remarkable efforts of many Native journalists over multiple generations, American Indians have also seized control over their representation in the media, and thus the way they are defined and included in the American community.

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<sup>41</sup> Mark Trahant, "American Indians at Press: The Native American Journalists Association," in *American Indians and the Mass Media*, ed. Meta G. Carstarphen and John P. Sanchez, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012), 220.

<sup>42</sup> "The American Indian and Alaska Native Population: 2010," *U.S. Census*, January 2012, <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-10.pdf>.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> The Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development, *The State of the Native Nations: Conditions under U.S. Policies of Self-Determination*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 13.

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